

Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

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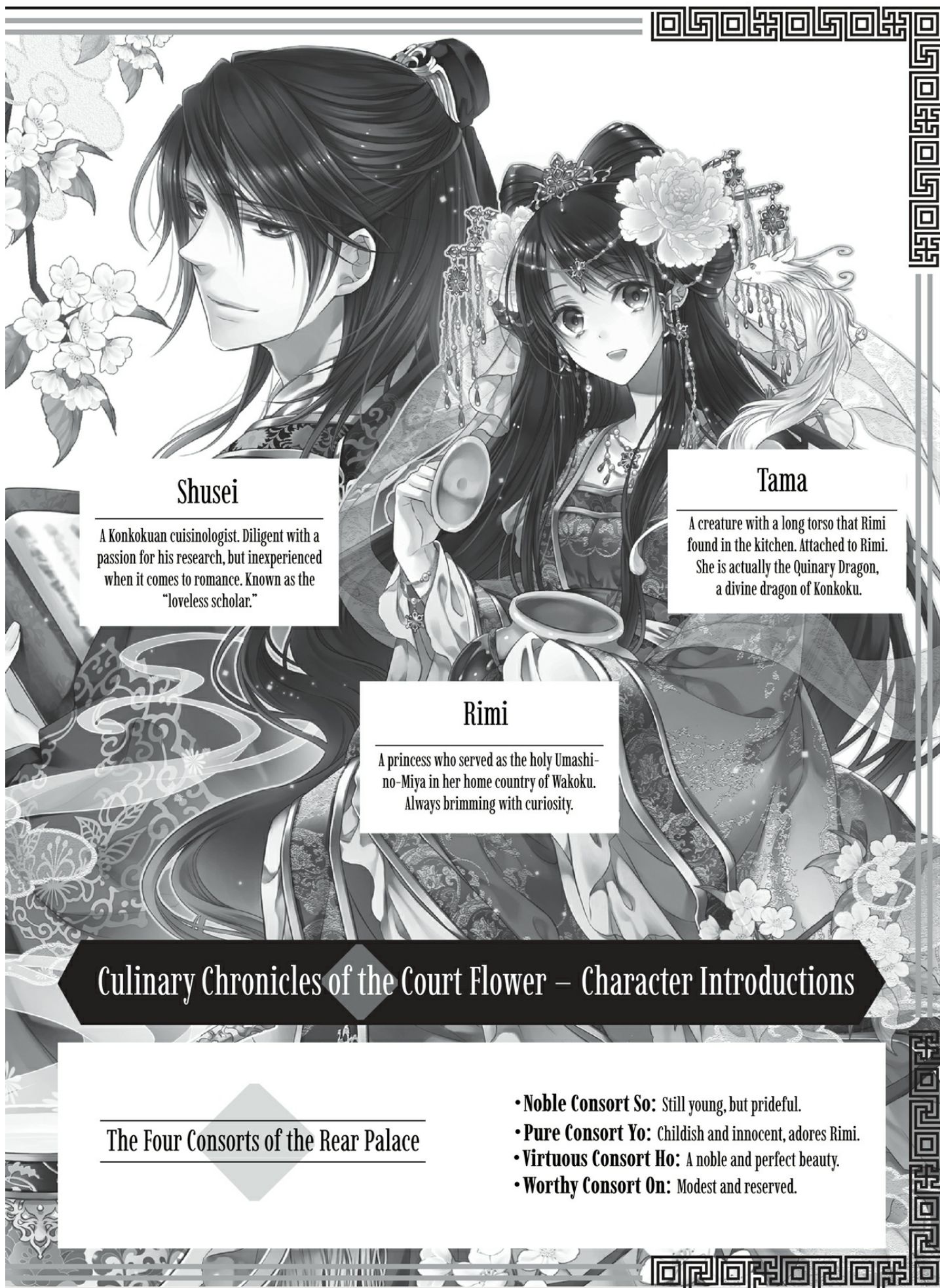
*Culinary
Chronicles
of the Court
Flower*



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Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: The Quinary Dragon and the Future Empress Gone Missing](#)

[Chapter 2: A Beauty in Men's Clothing](#)

[Chapter 3: Sunny, the Cook](#)

[Chapter 4: The Warmth of Your Hands](#)

[Chapter 5: A Night to Remember](#)

[Chapter 6: Father and Son](#)

[Chapter 7: A Familiar Face and a Bygone Spring](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

As the sun sank behind the horizon, the air began to cool. The height of summer had passed, and one could feel the difference in temperature on their skin. Crickets in the garden cried endlessly, lamenting summer's passing. Other insects produced a soft whine as they crept between the plants.

A man with a candle passed furtively through the overgrown, knee-high grass, making his way to a cluster of buildings hidden between the wild outgrowth of trees. He came to stand before the largest of the deserted buildings.

It was Shu Kojin, chancellor of Konkoku.

Behind Kojin stood Ryukan, personal spy of the Shu House. Slung over the old man's strong, lean shoulder and dressed in a pink ruqun was the unconscious body of Setsu Rimi.

Kojin pushed open the door to the house and entered. The air inside was damp and musty.

"This place must bring back memories. You spent a lot of time here in your younger days," Ryukan said.

Kojin laughed scornfully as he walked with the hem of his black shenyi raised off the ground.

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but I have no such sentiments. This is nothing but a squalid shack to me," the chancellor replied.

Something cracked beneath Kojin's foot. He lowered the dim light to get a better look and found a piece from the strategy game of togi underfoot. It was a carved horsehead that had snapped in two.

You're amazing at togi. What's your name?

Attempting to drown out Seishu's carefree voice, Kojin crushed the piece with his foot before continuing. He passed through the building and emerged into an enclosed garden. On the other side of it stood a sturdy stone building that had once been a library. Now, it sat empty.

The library's contents had been passed onto Kojin when Yo, who had owned the estate, had passed away. It had been the wish of Eika, Yo's only daughter and the chancellor's wife.

Master Yo had educated a great number of brilliant students. Kojin had been among them, spending many of his young adult years in these halls.

A heavy oaken door led to the former library. The only sign of its previous function was the empty bookcases lining the walls. A pair of shackles had been affixed to one of the building's pillars.

With a glance from Kojin, Ryukan set Rimi down on the cold stone floor and secured the shackles around her ankles. He then swiftly removed her hairpin and stuffed it in his pocket. Kojin glared at him, making the spy meekly duck his head.

"Just a little bonus," Ryukan said.

"When you sell it, make sure nobody can trace it back to you," Kojin ordered.

"Of course," Ryukan said as he rose to his feet. He walked to the door and hung the key to the shackles beside it.

Rimi was still lying flat and motionless on the stone floor, but something seemed to be shuffling around inside her skirt. Kojin placed the candle on the ground and grabbed the hem of her ruqun to see what it was. Sensing the motion, the thing beneath her skirt peeked its head out.

"Of course, the Quinary Dragon. I'm guessing it isn't interested in leaving the girl. It'll likely fly off if I try to force it," Kojin muttered to himself.

Rimi groaned softly and began to stir, making her chains clink in the dark. She jerked upright, surprised by the sound. When she found the chancellor looming over her, she curled up into a ball to escape him, causing the shackles to pull against her legs. That was when she noticed the chains and began looking around the room.

"Where am I? What are you going to do to me?!" she demanded.

"Where you are doesn't matter. And what happens to you next depends on you. If you convince the Quinary Dragon to go with me, I might release you," Kojin said.

"Tama's been entrusted to me by His Majesty. I can't give her to anyone but him."

“I’ll make sure it gets back to him.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you in a situation like this? No,” Rimi said, her voice quivering.

Kojin snorted.

“You might be a fool, but you’re a devoted one. I’ll come up with a way of getting it away from you. One of the priests ought to be able to manage it. And once we have the Quinary Dragon, we’ll take care of you.”

Kojin smiled slightly as he saw the color drain from Rimi’s face. This felt good.

Good? Why? Is this personal for you?

The chancellor laughed silently at the idea.

There’s nothing personal about this. She’s just a burden on Konkoku.

Kojin was cool. Controlled. That’s what he told himself as he turned and walked away.

Chapter 1: The Quinary Dragon and the Future

Empress Gone Missing

I

Ryu Shohi, fifth emperor of Konkoku, stormed toward his office. He was accompanied by his bodyguard, Shin Jotetsu, as well as the director of the rear palace, Sai Hakurei.

“What do you mean ‘*I have no idea*’?!” the emperor demanded.

“Just what I said. We know that Rimi returned to the Palace of the Water Spirit, came to the Hall of the Rising Dragon to see you, and was seen afterward by the ministers of Revenue and Rites. After that, she seems to have vanished like smoke,” Jotetsu explained with a shrug.

Shohi stopped and turned on his heel. His necklace, a string of red beads, clacked against itself harshly. The fury in his glare burned hot enough to turn a man into cinders.

“From within the palace?! Where could she have gone?! And she had the Quinary Dragon! You’re telling me it’s gone missing as well?!”

“Your Majesty, please calm down. We are as desperate to find her and the Quinary Dragon as you are,” Hakurei, the beautiful, golden-brown-eyed director, said softly to try and soothe the emperor. “The Quinary Dragon has granted you the authority to rule Konkoku. It will be found eventually.”

“It’s not just the dragon! I can’t lose Rimi either!” Shohi shouted and turned away, walking toward his office once more.

This is all wrong. How could she just disappear from the palace?

Rimi was Shohi’s favorite consort and his future wife, but she had little use for anyone politically. If anyone tried to use her to sway the emperor, Kojin and the ministers would surely stop Shohi from making any rash decisions. He was still

too young to get everything that he wanted, and he wasn't some emperor of legend who could demand complete loyalty from all his servants and retainers.

Anyone could see that Shohi was powerless without the support of the chancellor and ministers. He himself believed he could become a great ruler one day, but he hadn't reached that point yet. It hurt to admit that, but it was true.

It doesn't matter how much I scream and shout, my servants' support only goes so far. I can't upend the entire system solely for Rimi's sake. The Ho House knows that better than anyone. But who else in the palace has a reason to kidnap her?

The Quinary Dragon was the source of the emperor's divine right to rule. Its disappearance was an immense source of anxiety, but when Shohi thought about what might be happening to Rimi, his heart ached with fear. He prayed that she was all right. Simply leaving matters to Hakurei and Jotetsu was so frustrating. He wanted to take the lead and question every person he could find.

But that wasn't what Rimi would want. More than anything, she wanted Shohi to be a good ruler. It was apparent in everything she did. Letting his emotions rule him would be unbecoming of a ruler and a betrayal of her wishes.

This is so frustrating. But I'm the one who asked for this. Besides, my presence here gives other people meaning.

His four consorts, each clever and loyal, relied on his presence. He couldn't run off recklessly. Threatening his own well-being would also mean threatening their place in the world. He had to take care of himself and take his job as a ruler seriously.

"I'm not out of ideas yet. I'm planning on looking into something tonight," Jotetsu said, apparently trying to ease Shohi's pain.

"An idea?" Hakurei asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Sort of. I've got a good feeling about this one too."

The group eventually arrived at the imperial office. Shohi took a deep breath as he stood before the door emblazoned with a flying dragon.

“Both of you, find them. I don’t care what methods you have to use. This takes priority over everything else. Kunki can protect me. Just go,” the emperor ordered.

“Understood,” Jotetsu said. Hakurei simply bowed. Both of them went their separate ways.

Shohi opened the door to his office and found Chancellor Shu Kojin, Minister of Revenue To Rihan, and Minister of Rites Jin Keiyu waiting. They were seated around a table in the center of the room, but all rose to bow as the emperor entered. He approached the table, waving them off and leaning forward.

“Did you summon me regarding the Minister of Personnel selection? Have you made a decision?” Shohi asked.

Kojin and all the other ministers had been rushing to fill the vacant seat. The Minister of Personnel was responsible for matters like appointing, transferring, and evaluating officials. It was one of the most important positions in all of the six ministries. Someone in such a position could place officials hostile to the emperor throughout the government or silently drive them out before anyone realized it.

The selection of such an official needed to be done carefully. Forcing someone friendly with the emperor in would anger the Ho House and all the disgruntled officials behind them. However, they didn’t want to choose anyone too sympathetic to the Ho House either.

An ideal candidate would be someone the dissenters would allow who would also ally with the emperor after being elected.

“We have. Ryo Renka, Vice Minister of Works,” Kojin replied.

“Ryo Renka?” Shohi asked. The name was familiar, but he couldn’t recall a face.

Keiyu, sensing the emperor’s confusion, grinned.

“I doubt you’ve met,” he said.

“That’s ridiculous,” Shohi said. “I personally grant every minister and vice minister a certificate of office when they’re inaugurated. And they should all

have been at Rimi's Executive Audience."

"Ryo Renka had already been dispatched to the provinces when they were to receive their certificate of office. It ended up being dispatched by courier. Renka wasn't present for the Executive Audience either. A subordinate filled in, I believe," Keiyu explained casually, true to form.

"And they're a loon," Rihan added grimly.

"Why are we choosing a loon as the candidate?" Shohi asked.

"Renka is an old friend of mine. We both studied under Master Yo," Kojin said.

"And you think the Ho House will let you elect an old friend of yours?" Shohi asked with a frown.

"Renka was an old friend of Ho Seishu as well. The Ho House won't have any objections," Kojin explained. "Besides, Renka's known for being eccentric, and most of their work has been in the provinces. Once in office, I'll be able to convince our friend that this side is the right one. Seishu may have been a friend once, but Seishu isn't alive anymore. I'll just make—"

"Fine then. Approach this Ryo Renka about the candidacy. I assume you can make it happen, Kojin?" Shohi asked.

"Of course," the chancellor said with a bow.

Keiyu glanced at Kojin from the corner of his eye.

"Oh, that's right. Setsu Rimi's been missing for days now. Do you have any clues as to her whereabouts?" the minister asked.

"None," Shohi said bitterly.

"I don't see what anyone gets out of kidnapping her," Rihan added. His scowl made the old scar beneath his right eye contort.

"I don't know either. Do you have any idea, Kojin?" the emperor asked.

The corners of Kojin's mouth curled slightly.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea."



Outside the capital city of Annei stood a little house with walls made of packed mud. It had only a single room with a dirt floor. The room was a spartan place with nothing but a rickety table and chair in the center, a stove off to the side, and a bed in the back. Night was beginning to fall and darkness was settling within the room.

Ho Shusei, lord of the Ho House, sat in the chair, enduring the hot, humid air as he waited. When the darkness started growing, he searched around the stove and produced an oil lantern. Just as he was about to light the lantern, he heard a grunt from outside.

He's here.

Shusei placed the lantern on the table and opened the door.

"Well, I'm here, Lord Ho. I've got what you asked for in your letter too," Jotetsu said, smirking.

"Thanks. I know I'm asking a lot," Shusei said.

"I'm doing it for His Majesty. Any means necessary. That includes you," the spy said with a shrug.

"That's fine. We both want to find Rimi."

"Yeah? Well, I wanna know one thing before we go any further."

Jotetsu pulled a letter from his pocket and threw it on the ground between them. His eyes glinted with a piercing light. The letter had been written and secretly delivered to Jotetsu the night before. In it, Shusei had claimed to have an idea of who had kidnapped Rimi and requested assistance. Jotetsu had responded immediately, sharing the location of Ryukan's house with the scholar and asking him to wait there.

"The Ho House shouldn't give a damn about what happens to Rimi, and you said yourself that you don't have feelings for her anymore. So why are you trying to help?" Jotetsu asked. "I knew it. You're still—"

"Ridiculous," Shusei said, cutting Jotetsu's thought off. "I only want to help Rimi because I feel this is Shu Kojin's work. He's done something enormously stupid, and I thought it would be gratifying to expose it."

“All right, let’s say Shu Kojin really is behind this. You think I’m going to let His Majesty find out and dismiss the chancellor? The man might be a bastard, but the emperor needs him,” Jotetsu said, clearly on guard.

“I won’t let His Majesty blow things out of proportion. I don’t want Kojin to lose his position. I just want to humiliate him a bit,” Shusei explained. “And I promise that Rimi will be returned to the emperor’s side.”

“Why would you do that? Eliminating the chancellor would be a win for the Ho House.”

“Winning is fine and good, but it’s not enough for me. If he loses his position because of a personal blunder, then it simply ends with a bit of embarrassment for him. That’s hardly good enough. I’d rather humiliate him over this and keep him where he is. I want to make him taste the disgrace of being personally removed by me.”

“So in the end, you *do* want to take him down.”

“Eventually.”

“You really hate the guy that much?” Jotetsu asked, frowning at Shusei’s nonchalant attitude.

“It’s not a matter of hate. He’s had me at his mercy. I want to enjoy having him at mine. I believe you were the one who told me to enjoy my fate.”

“I suppose I did.”

Jotetsu pulled the package inside and shoved it to the ground. In this case, the “package” was Ryukan, personal spy of the Shu House, bound and gagged.

“Sorry, master. Lord Ho’s got questions for you,” Jotetsu said with a hint of sadness, looking down at the man with crossed arms.

Shusei knelt down to get a look at Ryukan.

“I know about you. I’ve seen you around the Shu estate. You’re fath—Shu Kojin’s spy, aren’t you? What do you know about Setsu Rimi?” the scholar asked.

Shusei had received word about Rimi’s disappearance a few days ago. He already knew that some would view Rimi as a hindrance and would try to have

her removed. He just hadn't guessed it would be so soon.

The problem was Aisha, the imperial princess of Saisakoku. For the officials who wanted to form secure ties with Saisakoku, Rimi was an obstacle. The more Shohi fell for her, the more of an obstacle she became.

Only someone in the emperor's camp would consider Rimi a problem, and only someone with no concern for Shohi's feelings would act on it. Shu Kojin was the only logical answer.

Shusei removed the gag so Ryukan could speak.

"How the hell should I know? I've got nothing to do with her," Ryukan said.

"I'd rather not resort to violence. Please, tell me what you know," Shusei said.

Jotetsu walked over to the bed, looked beneath it, and then turned down the cover. He walked over to the stove and whistled while looking over the assortment of pots and bottles beside it.

"Looks like you've been eating good, master," he said, pulling a bit of food from one of the pots and popping it in his mouth. He brought some over to Shusei. "Want a bite?"

The pot contained sugared dragon flower fruit. Grown far to the south in the Southern Trinity, it was a luxury in Konkoku.

"I'll pass. I can't stand dragon flower fruit," Shusei said. The fruit was prized for its unique floral scent, but he'd never been able to stand its smell.

"Your loss," Jotetsu said, putting the pot back. He opened another one and laughed as he pulled out the contents. "You never change, master. You can't resist swiping valuables when you're on the job, can you?"

Jotetsu was holding a jade hairpin. Shusei jumped to his feet at the sight of it.

"Recognize this?" Jotetsu asked.

"It's Rimi's," Shusei said, taking the comb in hand. He definitely remembered it.

"I guess that proves Shu Kojin's behind things."

"I suppose I have some questions to ask."

“You think you’re gonna get an honest answer out of Kojin?” Jotetsu asked.

“I doubt I will. But that doesn’t matter. I have the pin as well as Ryukan. That should be enough to put pressure on him,” Shusei replied.

The enemy was Kojin. Shusei doubted that the chancellor would give up Rimi’s location. But the scholar believed that making him feel panicked or cornered would create an opportunity.



II

“That was delicious. Thanks, Tama,” Rimi said, leaning back against the pillar with a sigh.

She looked up at the little window near the top of the room. The sun was already setting, and it would only be another thirty minutes or so before the room grew dark.

Tama, the little silver-furred dragon others called the Quinary Dragon, sat in Rimi’s lap. She cheerfully wagged her tail as she nibbled on a peach.

It had already been three days.

Rimi had seen neither Kojin nor Ryukan since they’d locked her in the library. The building she’d been confined in was made of solid stone, and the shackles on her ankles were sturdy, heavy things. No matter how much she struggled, Rimi was unable to get them off. She’d heard no voices outside either, only the sound of wind blowing between the surrounding trees.

Luckily, she’d found a blanket bunched up near the chains. There was a water pail in the corner and a place to wash one’s hands. Just enough to barely survive.

The main problem had been the lack of food. On the second day, Rimi had collapsed from hunger. That was when Tama decided to take charge. Looking up at the window, she gave Rimi a reassuring glance, then raced up the wall and out the opening.

It was an inspiring sight for Rimi, reminding her of the divine dragon’s power. She’d expected Tama to go find help, but...

After a while, Tama returned with a sack stuffed full of peaches. The little dragon seemed so proud of itself that Rimi couldn’t help but smile. There was no reason for a divine creature like her to take care of a human. At Castle Seika, Tama had protected Rimi and Shusei, but one couldn’t expect the dragon to do that every time Rimi was in danger. Having her fetch a meal like this was basically a miracle.

Once Rimi had filled her stomach with peaches, she felt her strength begin to return. She searched the room, poking and prodding at the walls, and rubbing her shackles against the stones in an attempt to free herself. She called for help, but there was nobody around to hear her. On the third day, after a night's rest, she tried again to find some way to escape. However, the day eventually ended, and she was no closer to freedom.

As Rimi stroked the silky fur on Tama's back, she felt her anxious desire to scream for help melt away with each passing moment. She wondered if it was the healing power of the dragon. The consort ran her fingertip along Tama's head, poking at the little horns between her ears.

If they do manage to separate us, I wonder if they'll kill me.

She was suddenly very aware of the chill permeating the stone chamber.

He said they'll bring a priest to do it, but I never thought it would take them so long.

Rimi could only faintly guess why this was happening to her. She herself had worried that she might be burdensome to the emperor. Of course Kojin considered her an eyesore.

He'd called her a poisonous flower. From his perspective, maybe that was true. She didn't want to be a poison, but maybe that's what she'd ended up being. She felt like she'd lost sight of herself, becoming blind to where she stood and turning into a burden to the emperor before she'd even realized it.

Shohi was surely worried. Rimi was powerless to help her situation, but she still felt bad for adding to his worries. The empress-to-be wondered if she should just leave her fate in his hands and wait to be rescued.

But the one who'd captured Rimi was the emperor's most trusted advisor, Shu Kojin. Nobody would guess that he was the person who'd kidnapped the emperor's future bride.

The only one who might suspect the chancellor would have to be someone who could analyze the situation calmly, understand the reason for Rimi's disappearance, and recognize that Kojin wasn't to be trusted.

There was only one person Rimi could think of who could do that: Ho Shusei.

But there was no way he would be coming to her rescue. He had a goal that made Rimi his enemy, a fact they both recognized.

And so, Rimi found the idea of sitting back and waiting to be rescued pathetic. If she didn't want to be so troublesome, she needed to figure things out on her own.

"How long would it take to find a priest they could use? Do you have any idea, Tama?"

If they were able to find a wandering priest, he would be able to use his powers to take Tama. After that, Rimi would be dealt with. She wondered how much longer she'd be alive. Thinking about it made her shiver even as the fear boiled up in her breast.

Tama looked up and squeaked.

"If a priest does come, you have to run away. I'm worried the chancellor will find a way to take you for his own. You'll probably have to find your own way back to His Majesty."

Tama shook her head, as if vowing to never leave the consort's side.

"I appreciate that you want to stay with me, but you have to listen!" Rimi said, frowning.

Suddenly, Rimi realized she could hear faint footsteps on grass. Somebody was coming. She pulled her knees to her chest and held Tama close. The sun had begun to set, and the light coming through the window above was growing weaker. The colors in the room were fading, and the darkness had begun to grow.

Is it the chancellor? Or could it be...

The door opened. Rimi could make out a slim figure entering the shadowy room. They were wearing a crimson shenyi and carried the slight scent of tobacco. She couldn't make out their face, but she could see a long tobacco pipe in their hand, which bled a string of smoke.

"Well well, what's a girl doing in a place like this?"

Their voice was husky and relaxed. Rimi curled up even tighter, while Tama

burrowed under her skirt.

Who is that?!

Rimi tried to breathe deeply, but her breath wouldn't come out right. It was like she'd forgotten how to breathe.

He must be the priest.

"Tama, run," she whispered, but the little dragon just climbed deeper into her skirt.

The person fumbled around near the doorway before producing a candle. They touched the wick to their tobacco pipe, causing the candle to flicker to life and illuminate their surroundings.

The priest was a slender, beautiful man with long, wavy hair that had been bundled into a simple ponytail. He looked to be about the same age as Rihan and Keiyu. There was a decadent air about him, heightened by the scent of tobacco and the deep red color of his shenyi.

The man knocked his pipe against the wall, sending the embers and ashes scattering to the ground. He then tucked it in his belt, carefully keeping the hot end away from his skin. He held up the candle and then retrieved the key to the shackles beside the door.

"Hard to believe this is still here. Is it sad that I've missed it? I bet Kojin's never gotten to experience this," he said.

Rimi didn't understand anything he was saying, but he clearly knew Shu Kojin. As he approached, she felt the fear rise higher and higher in her throat with each step. He crouched in front of the consort to get a better look at her face. His eyes were mysterious, dark, almost to the point of being black, though they had the faintest hint of green.

"And who are you?" he asked.

Apparently, Kojin hadn't told the priest who she actually was. Maybe the chancellor didn't trust him? Maybe she could explain things and convince him to let her go.

Convincing people isn't really my forte, but...

“I can’t tell you that,” Rimi said.

If the priest was curious about her identity, then refusing to reveal it could buy her some time. It was the best solution she could come up with.

“Stubborn, aren’t you? You really aren’t going to tell me?” he asked.

“What are you going to do with me?” Rimi demanded.

“Good question. I’m going to get you out of here first. I’ll think about it after that. Can’t decide what to do with you if you won’t tell me who you are, no?” the priest said as he undid Rimi’s shackles.

She’d been confined for three days now. Surely the search for her had made progress in that time. They could be closing in on her location. But if she wasn’t there anymore when the search found this place, they’d be back where they started, and the chances of her being found would be even lower.

I need to leave some kind of trace...

If she could do that, it would let others know she’d been there and had been moved. At least then the people searching for her would have a clue.

Rimi quickly slipped one of her earrings off and placed it in a crack on the stone floor.

The priest pulled Rimi up by her arms and led her outside. Once she was out of her prison, she realized she was on some sort of abandoned estate. They were in a garden filled with overgrown grass surrounded by buildings and walkways. Though the buildings had begun to rot, this had clearly once been the home of someone important.

The pillars were made of fine logs with no knots, and the support beams were thick and sturdy. Though the roof was crumbling in places and plants had begun to sprout between the cracks in the tiles, it was still a large, sturdy roof. There were no unnecessary paintings or ornaments. The buildings exuded a sense of bright serenity.

They passed through a building and out into another garden. A horse had been tied to a tree and was enjoying a taste of the nearby grass.

The priest deftly untied the horse with one hand while holding Rimi’s arm

with the other. He pushed her, urging her to climb up onto the horse, before climbing up and straddling it behind her. His arms were on both sides of Rimi, holding her in place.

“Time to go, She Without A Name,” he said.

The horse set off on a trot. As the horse bounced Rimi up and down, she felt her heart rising into her throat. She tried to calm herself down and waited for some chance to escape.

But she was too flustered. An opening appeared in the man’s arms, and she considered trying to slip through them and off of the horse. But her panic made her jerk and flinch, and the man tightened his arms around her.

“Just hold still and calm down,” he hissed.

What am I going to do? Where is he taking me?

If he took her somewhere with a bunch of other priests, she’d surely be separated from Tama.

They left the abandoned estate and traveled a narrow path between rice fields. The surrounding buildings were isolated and empty. Rimi couldn’t see any lights from nearby villages. The area was wide and flat, interrupted in places by dark forests.

After traveling down a trail, they came to a wide road that seemed to lead into a town. It sloped gently downward, and eventually, lights appeared in the distance. From the size and brightness, Rimi guessed it was Annei. They seemed to be about a quarter hour’s ride from the capital.

I need to leave a trail of some kind.

Rimi removed her other earring and waited for an opening to drop it to the ground.

The priest turned his horse onto a smaller branching road. The new road turned into a steep incline. As they climbed, an estate came into view in the far distance. The sloped roof cast a black shadow against the faint starlight. It didn’t appear to be a large estate, but it still looked prestigious. The gate, adorned with octagonal lanterns, stood open.

Was it an estate for priests? If it was, there'd surely be others waiting for him.

If I go through that gate, it might be all over for me. If I'm going to jump, it has to be now!

They neared the gate, entering the field of light cast by the lanterns. Rimi steeled herself and shoved back against the priest's chest. The moment she did, something touched her hand.

Huh?!

The priest's body jolted, and Rimi was shaken by it.

What did I just touch?!

In her shock, Rimi lost the chance to escape. Before she could slip off the horse, the priest grabbed her around the waist.

"Don't be stupid, that's dangerous," the priest warned.

Rimi cursed at herself, but it was too late. She looked up at the priest's face in a panic.

This person is...

III

The chancellor's chambers were situated in the Hall of Law and Culture. Located southeast of the Hall of the Rising Dragon where the emperor resided, the Hall of Law and Culture was made up of two adjoining buildings. Normally, the numerous rooms inside these buildings would be fully populated, but the area was deserted.

It was typical to find two or three scribes and five or six cleaners. But since Shu Kojin had become chancellor, he was the only one allowed to remain in the Hall of Law and Culture. When scribes or cleaners were needed, they were summoned from the Ministry of Rites. Aside from Kojin's office, the hall was empty, except for some chairs and tables. The air there was always cool, and the officials spoke of the atmosphere as almost oppressively quiet.

The chancellor believed it was more logical to have those scribes working

elsewhere, doing more important work, rather than being wasted by focusing solely on him.

The sun had already set, and the only light in the entire hall was in the chancellor's office. Kojin sat at his desk, a pile of finished papers before him. The shadow cast by his brush wavered as a breeze blew through the window.

"Chancellor Shu?" Kojin's messenger boy called from outside the office with a bow.

The boy served as an intermediary and courier for Kojin since the chancellor didn't want anyone to appear unannounced.

"A message arrived from Mrs. Yo. She was wondering when you might be returning home," the messenger reported.

Kojin found himself slightly irked by the reserved message. His wife, Yo Eika, was a famed calligrapher and a kind, compassionate woman. But ever since he'd won her hand, the chancellor had never felt at ease around her. He'd thought winning her over would be a triumphant victory, but after marrying her, he'd found himself dissatisfied.

Kojin scowled inwardly.

"Tell her I don't know when I'll be home," he said without raising his head.

"I understand," the servant answered. He then lowered his voice, almost mumbling. "Also, err, you have a guest."

"Well, spit it out. Who is it?" Kojin snapped, raising his head.

"Me."

Standing in the doorway and dressed in a blue shenyi was Shusei. Kojin bristled at how calm the scholar appeared to be.

Shusei? How shameless can the boy be?

"Who told you to let him in here?!" Kojin barked at the servant.

The boy went pale, but Shusei placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"He wanted me to wait while he asked for permission, but I forced my way in. You honestly think he could deny a direct order from the master of the Ho

House?” Shusei explained.

The servant whimpered an apology.

“Fine. Leave us,” Kojin said with a dismissive wave.

The servant boy scurried away as Shusei stepped into the room. The chancellor slipped the paper he was working on out of sight and leaned back in his chair.

It disgusts me how much he looks like Seishu. It's like I'm looking at him.

Facing off like this, the realization struck Kojin all over again. A long moment passed as they stared in silence.

“Lord Ho. Do you have some business with me?” Kojin finally said.

Shusei dug around in his pocket before pulling out a jade hairpin, which he set on the desk.

That damned idiot.

Even after Kojin had explicitly told Ryukan not to let it be traced back to him, the fool had somehow still gotten himself caught. What had brought Shusei here was now clear.

He suspects I've taken Setsu Rimi. Still, even though Ryukan may have botched this, he wouldn't have told them anything. There's no proof. All Shusei has is a hunch.

“And what's this?” Kojin asked calmly.

“Setsu Rimi's hairpin. It was in the possession of your personal spy, Ryukan. Rimi disappeared from inside the palace, and that could hardly have happened without someone's assistance. You have the means to make her disappear, and you're the only one who would have the audacity to eliminate her despite His Majesty's desires,” Shusei accused.

“A hairpin doesn't prove anything. My guess would be that Ryukan simply found the thing somewhere.”

“You're right. But I'm not looking for proof. I'm already confident it was you. However, I'm going to do you a favor and not tell anyone. Not even His

Majesty,” the scholar said. “I’m sure it would be inconvenient for you if His Majesty found out you’d kidnapped his favorite consort. All I want from you is Rimi’s location.”

Shusei’s impertinence made anger boil in Kojin’s gut. The boy was mocking him, thinking he had the upper hand. He’d probably come simply so he could look down on the chancellor.

“You think you have leverage here? His Majesty would never believe your word,” Kojin said.

“Perhaps not. But what about Jotetsu’s?” Shusei retorted.

So the crafty little rat was still in contact with Jotetsu. Kojin’s biological son, whom he’d used as a tool and spy, had joined hands with the chancellor’s adopted son to go against him. The irony was bitter.

“So, Shin Jotetsu has joined forces with the lord of the Ho House? If His Majesty needs to know anything, it’s that,” Kojin said.

“Feel free to let him know. I only assisted him in this matter because our interests were aligned. Of course, if you let him know, His Majesty will learn the truth of what you’ve done.”

Every casual retort from Shusei made the anger rise higher in Kojin’s breast. This wouldn’t stand. A counterattack was in order.

He doesn’t have any proof, and more importantly, he doesn’t know where Setsu Rimi is.



It would be easy to prod at Shusei and get him to react. Once he was upset, his decision-making would suffer, making it far easier to manipulate him.

I'll send a priest to the Yo estate tomorrow night. In the meantime, I'll make the boy squirm for a day or two.

Ryukan had sent word that he'd managed to contact a priest who could assist. The next day, Rimi and the Quinary Dragon would be parted.

"I told you that I was willing to keep your secret. You should take me up on my offer before I change my mind. Where is Rimi?" Shusei demanded.

"She's dead," Kojin said.

Shusei's eyes widened.

"If you came here thinking you'd outwit and humiliate me, you're too late. The girl is dead. Ryukan fed her corpse to the wolves," Kojin continued. "You and Jotetsu can feed His Majesty whatever story you like. You have no evidence. You can neither prove that I took her nor that I killed her. You don't even have a body."

Shusei was silent. His eyes were fixed rigidly in place. It seemed like he was doing everything he could to keep from reacting, but it was hopeless. His confidence from before had vanished.

Kojin laughed.

"You're lying," the scholar finally said.

"Is that what you think?"

"You're lying because you can't stand the idea of giving in to me."

Kojin's only response was a wide, amused smile.

"If that's your game, fine. I won't give any ground either. I won't even tell His Majesty what you've done," Shusei said. "But I promise you, I will find Rimi. I'm sure Jotetsu will help, as well. He already has Ryukan, and I'm sure he knows some of your favorite hiding places. We'll be searching them."

Shusei's words were calm, but he couldn't hide the agitation in his eyes.

"I wonder how many wolf stomachs you'll have to search before you find

her?” Kojin asked tauntingly.

“Shut your mouth!” Shusei roared and slammed his fists on the desk. He then leaned forward, fury burning in his eyes. “Shut your mouth, Shu Kojin. I will find her, and she will be alive. Alive and safe.”

Shusei picked the hairpin up off the table and turned around.

“Fool,” Kojin spat.



As he left the room, Shusei placed his hand over the hairpin in his pocket.

She's alive. She must be.

The words were more prayer than thought.

Shusei strode out of the Hall of Law and Culture when he heard someone call to him. It was Jotetsu, lurking in the darkness by the gate. The spy frowned when he saw the expression on Shusei's face.

“What's wrong? Did you learn anything?” he asked.

“He said she's dead,” Shusei said in a gravelly voice, clenching his jaw.

“Bullshit.”

“I don't believe it either. Rimi has the Quinary Dragon. He can't kill her without doing something about it.”

“But we're no closer to finding Rimi then, are we?”

“No, we are. Now that Shu Kojin knows we've picked up his scent, he'll feel pressured to get rid of Rimi. If he's come up with this 'Rimi's dead' gambit just now, it's proof he feels pressured. If he acts impatiently, it should create an opening for us...” Shusei trailed off in thought. “Jotetsu, I want you to intentionally create an opportunity for Ryukan to escape.”

“Let him escape?! He knows where Rimi is!”

“Exactly. If he's any good as a spy, he'd never tell us what he knows. We'd need time and cruelty to make him speak. I'd rather avoid doing anything unpleasant, and we don't have the time. We need another method.”

The moon was slender as it hung low in the western sky. Shusei's expression

was as sharp as that slim crescent.

“Shu Kojin’s reputation hangs in the balance. He’ll only be able to use someone he can trust. Furthermore, the more people he involves, the greater the risk he’ll be discovered. If he wants to get rid of Rimi, he’ll either need to do it himself or use Ryukan,” Shusei explained.

“I get it. So you want me to make Ryukan think he escaped and then tail him?”

Shusei was happy he could rely on Jotetsu’s keen insight.

“He was your master. Do you think you can follow him without being noticed?” the scholar asked.

“You ever hear the phrase, ‘the student has become the master’? Well, I’m the master now,” Jotetsu said with a grin.

Chapter 2: A Beauty in Men's Clothing

I

Rimi looked up at the priest who had her pinned in place.

What...?

The priest skillfully managed the reins and brought the horse to the estate's gate. An old man, perhaps a stable keeper, approached.

"Welcome home, master. I see you've brought a guest. Who might she be?" the man asked.

"I was passing by the Yo estate and noticed the path had been disturbed. I thought someone might have intruded, so I took a look. Imagine my surprise to find her chained up in captivity. Not sure who she is. She's apparently not interested in giving her name," the priest replied.

What? This is just a coincidence...?

The old man held the horse in place while the priest put an arm around Rimi's waist and removed her from the horse.

"The girl was chained up? How dreadful. Who would do such a thing?" the man asked.

"I have my guesses, but there's no way to know for certain. We just have to hope she opens up eventually," the priest replied.

As the old man led the horse away, Rimi looked up at the person beside her.

"What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost," the priest said.

"You're not a priest?" Rimi asked.

"A priest? Do I look like I do rituals or divination? I've been called a scoundrel, but this is the first time I've been accused of that," the person scoffed.

"And you're a...woman, aren't you?"

The man... No, the woman before Rimi laughed.

She is a woman.

When Rimi had shoved their chest trying to escape, her palm had touched something soft. The consort had been so shocked that she'd missed her chance to escape.

"I don't remember ever saying I was a man," the woman said, apparently unoffended. She must have been accustomed to being mistaken for a man. Even Rimi, who had just touched the woman's breast, found it hard to see her as anything but a dainty man.

"Who are you?" Rimi asked. She realized she'd been so frightened and anxious that she'd never bothered to ask for a name.

The woman's lips curled in a smile.

"Ryo Renka. I serve His Majesty as Vice Minister of Works," she said.

She's a bureaucrat. And a vice minister too. They're really important.

A wave of relief came over Rimi as she realized the woman was neither a priest nor a bandit but an official who worked in the palace.

"As I'm sure you can tell, I'm nobody to be afraid of. Tell me who you are, who chained you up there, and why. Then I can decide what to do with you. If some deviant carried you off and locked you up there, I'd be happy to help. But if you're some infamous villain the authorities are chasing, I can't exactly let you go," Renka said.

If Rimi just told Renka who she was, she'd be able to have her send a message to the palace. After that, it wouldn't be long at all before Shohi came to rescue her.

But wait... She's a palace official.

A nagging voice in the corner of her mind stopped her.

The court was currently in the middle of a power struggle. Some, backed by the Ho House, opposed Shohi's rule, while others supported it. Which side did Renka fall on?

If she opposes Shohi and I just give up my name, she might use me against him.

She also seemed to be an acquaintance of Kojin's. If she was on the chancellor's side, Rimi might end up right back in his hands.

"What's wrong? Are you going to tell me or not?" Renka said.

"Umm... I work at a teahouse in Annei. A terrible customer kidnapped me," Rimi lied. "Thank you so much for rescuing me. I'll be going home now, but I'll be able to send you a proper thank you eventually."

She quickly came up with a plausible story, smiled, and tried to gently pull away from Renka's grip. However, the vice minister held tight around Rimi's waist.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Gu Keiyo," Rimi replied. It was the name of the old handmaid who'd served Rimi at the Palace of Small Wings.

"What's your father's name?"

Rimi struggled to come up with a man's name. Panicked, her gaze drifted around, avoiding Renka's.

"My father passed away. I...never met him, so I don't know. My mother passed away when I was young as well."

"No family? Then who raised you?"

"Oh, well, the owner of the teahouse was very kind and—"

"What's their name?"

Rimi froze. That one couldn't be answered with "they died" or "I don't know." Those in the Konkokuan court used both their family name and a courtesy name, but she'd heard commoners didn't use courtesy names. However, those in high society, like wealthy merchants and landowners, would sometimes use courtesy names, even though they weren't from noble families. Rimi wondered if a teahouse owner might use a courtesy name. She wasn't really sure.

Renka placed a palm on the consort's cheek and leaned in close.

“C’mon now. You’re telling me you forgot the name of the man who saved you?”

There was a threatening note in Renka’s voice, and Rimi realized that fooling the woman was hopeless.

“I’m sorry, I can’t tell you who I am. I have my reasons. Please, don’t ask any more questions, just let me go.”

“So I’m guessing your name isn’t Gu Keiyo either,” Renka said.

“It’s the name of someone I know. I promise you, I wasn’t locked up there because I’d done something wrong. Please believe me,” Rimi said.

“Which is exactly what someone who’d done something wrong would say. But whether you’re a criminal or not, I’m not planning on letting you go. After all...” Renka’s voice dropped to a low whisper, “...if you can’t even tell me your name, it makes me *very* interested. Wouldn’t you be curious too?”

Rimi realized she wasn’t going to be talking her way out of this. She looked around quickly. The only people around were Renka and herself. The gate was about twenty or thirty paces behind them.

If I’m going to run, it has to be now.

The consort tried to keep Renka from noticing as she bent her knees, bracing herself to break away.

“C’mon now,” Renka said, grasping Rimi lightly by the wrist and turning to walk away. Rimi pulled away from the woman’s grip and ran for the gate. Renka clucked her tongue and chased after her.

The gate was so close. Rimi was only a few paces away from it when she felt Renka seize her by the shoulder. Rimi tried to fight back, but the vice minister gripped both of her wrists tightly. Her grip was powerful to the point of being painful, and Rimi’s knees buckled as she softly cried out in pain. Renka let go of one of Rimi’s wrists to grab her tightly around the waist, holding her in place.

“I’m going to have to keep you on a short leash, aren’t I, She Without A Name?” Renka said with a smirk. “If you’re going to run, you ought to at least be smart about it. If you run off into the mountains in the middle of the night,

you'll be *lucky* to be eaten by wolves. And if you run into bandits, well..."

"I'm begging you! There are people who are worried about me. Please, let me go!"

Renka's painful grip made Rimi whimper. Tears pooled in the consort's eyes, but Renka remained merciless.

"Then tell me your name," the vice minister said.

Renka kept a tight grip on Rimi's wrist as she began to walk. Rimi wasn't sure where the woman was taking her or what she planned to do with her. She didn't know anything, and it scared her.

Renka's grip was strong, and Rimi couldn't fight back against her. She wanted to break down into tears, but she fought off the urge. Crying wouldn't get her out of this situation.



With Ryukan in Shusei's grasp, Kojin feared he would need to move on his own. However, his spy narrowly escaped the scholar's grasp the next day. *Jotetsu was my student, after all*, he'd bragged. It was a lucky thing that Jotetsu had been the one guarding him. Kojin had chastised Ryukan for falling into their clutches and letting the hairpin be traced back to them, but now, everything seemed to be falling into place.

The next day, a priest would be dispatched to the Yo estate. Everything would be finished soon.

Kojin stood on the walkway outside his office in the Hall of Law and Culture. He was watching the evening sun cast slanting rays across the stone ground. The cicadas were crying, lamenting the end of summer. He was waiting for news from his messenger boy, who finally arrived.

"I've delivered all the letters, as you instructed," the boy said, bowing.

"Good work. Were you able to meet your friends in the Ministry of War and the army? Was it fun?" Kojin asked, looking back with a grin.

"Yes, it was. Thank you very much," the boy said.

"I'm glad to hear it. Now go."

Seemingly relieved by his master's unusually good mood, the boy went off running. Kojin couldn't help but chuckle at the child's wide grin.

The boy had been entrusted with a secret duty today. Kojin had him deliver letters to dissidents in the Ministry of War and amongst the army. He told the boy to place them secretly, slipping them into desks and beneath armor while they were away.

In truth, the dissidents in question were secretly in contact with Kojin, and the chancellor needed the letters to be delivered to them discreetly. Or so he'd told the boy. When the messenger learned he was being entrusted with secret messages, his eyes had lit up. He also apparently had friends working as messengers in the Ministry of War and for the army, so Kojin had given him sweets and told him to take his time seeing them.

Now to see if this bears fruit. Hopefully, they will find their way to the Ho House.

The memory of Shusei glaring down at him the day before filled Kojin with the desire to fight. He'd always considered his adopted son to be broken and tamed. He wasn't about to let himself lose to someone like that.

I'll need to do something about Renka too. That good-for-nothing hasn't even responded to my offer.

It was annoying, but he knew how Renka could be. That was just a minor nuisance.

Eika said she was planning on visiting. I'll see if she can pester Renka for an answer.

Mrs. Yo was not a comforting presence for Kojin, but she had her uses. After all, she was Master Yo's only daughter. She was acquainted with many of his most famous students. None of the bureaucrats who had apprenticed under Master Yo, To Rihan and Jin Keiyu among them, would dare mistreat her.

"Chancellor Shu," a hushed voice called from the garden, interrupting Kojin's reverie.

It was Ryukan. The spy was hidden, crouched in the shadow of a boxwood, but the chancellor could tell from his voice that the man was panicked.

“What’s the matter? Didn’t I tell you to wait until nightfall?” Kojin demanded.

“The thing is... I went to the Yo Estate to check on Setsu Rimi, but I couldn’t find her. She’s gone,” Ryukan said.

For a moment, Kojin was too stunned to speak.

What did he say?

“I found hoofprints. Someone seems to have taken her,” Ryukan continued.

“Was it Shusei?”

“No. I couldn’t find any signs of Shusei or Jotetsu traveling that way. They’ve been focused on searching my safe houses.”

“Then who could’ve taken her?!”

Ryukan had no answer but ashamed silence.

Who?! Who is it?!

Kojin trembled with anger as his hands balled into fists.

“Find the girl. Immediately. Shusei and Jotetsu must not find her before you. If you find who took her, feel free to kill them. If Setsu Rimi’s told anyone of my involvement, then my reputation is at risk,” Kojin ordered.

“Understood,” Ryukan said before slipping away.

Kojin briefly stood frozen in place, trapped in a slanting sunbeam.

“This has been nothing but trouble,” he grumbled.

His shadow stretched long behind him.

II

“Wait, this is...lovely?” Rimi mumbled to herself as she stared at a four o’clock flower.

She was sitting in the entrance of the room she’d been given, chin resting on her knees as she gazed out at the garden. Vibrant red and white four o’clock flowers bloomed outside, filling the air with a subtly sweet scent. It was a perfect match for the slightly sticky summer night.

Tama sat on Rimi's shoulder, eyes closed in delight as she enjoyed the scent of flowers.

I was so worried last night, but...

When Renka had announced that she had no intention of letting Rimi go, the consort had been terrified. She'd barely been able to hold back her tears as she was hauled away to one of the estate's rooms. She had dreaded what might be on the horizon for her. But Renka had simply announced that Rimi would be staying in the room and had then left her.

There was no lock on the door and no guards to keep her there. Rimi had reacted to her relaxed imprisonment with teary-eyed confusion.

The room was furnished with a black-lacquered bed, a table, and a single chair. It was immaculate; incense was burning, the bedding was made of silk, and bedclothes had been provided. There was also a dresser, making it seem more like a guest room than a cell.

Rimi was wandering the room in a confused daze when a handmaid brought her dinner, a bowl of egg and rice porridge. It was delicious, tasting like chicken stock and onions. The warmth emanated out from her stomach to fill her whole body. It was the consort's first real meal in days, and she felt incredibly grateful for it.

Renka had apparently also ordered that Rimi be allowed a hot bath.

"Now get some rest!" the handmaid ordered.

With her belly full and her body clean, the consort acquiesced and climbed into bed.

As Rimi was lying in bed with Tama snuggled against her, she thought about what an odd woman Renka was. She discovers a strange girl being held captive, but she finds her so suspicious that she won't release her? Then she treats her dubious prisoner to a king's welcome?

I can't let my guard down. For all I know, she's a monster who fattens up lost travelers and eats them.

Still, whatever Renka might have been thinking, she'd saved Rimi from a

terrible fate. Between the exhaustion of her confinement and her relief at being rescued from it, the consort managed a fitful night's sleep.

When Rimi awoke around dawn the next morning, she was still tired. But she didn't feel safe enough to allow herself to lounge around in bed. She slipped on her ruqun and took advantage of her freedom to explore the estate. She wondered if she might even be able to slip away while others were asleep and make it back to the palace.

But Renka was not so careless. The estate was surrounded by fairly high walls, and without a ladder, there was no way of scaling them. There was a front and rear gate, but the rear gate was locked, and the front gate was being manned by a brawny guard.

Rimi had spent the rest of the day glumly wandering the estate, disappointed she wouldn't be escaping. Tama, meanwhile, had pranced around Rimi's feet, seemingly excited to be somewhere new. The consort had run into stable hands, maids, and guards, but none of them seemed concerned that Rimi was out of her room. However, Renka was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she'd shut herself up in her chambers.

As the sun began to set, Rimi returned to her room. Powerless, all she could do was sit and stare at the four o'clock flowers.

"So I can't leave, but I can do whatever else I want..." she mumbled to herself.

But even if she was free to do whatever she wanted, she didn't actually have anything to do. All she was capable of was sitting and staring at the garden.

Having nothing to occupy herself with, Rimi's mind began to wander. She felt bad for worrying Shohi and was distressed that Kojin might find her. She was frustrated by her inability to escape. And as she stared at the four o'clocks, whose seeds and roots were poisonous, she couldn't help but remember Kojin's words.

If I really am a poison, would I be harming His Majesty and the country if I ask for his help?

Unease welled up inside of her again.

Lady Saigu, I crossed a sea, changed my name, became a consort, and cut ties

with my past to become empress. I don't even know who I am anymore.

Rimi unconsciously called out to her sister, but the Saigu's familiar voice didn't answer. The consort breathed a deep sigh and realized she could smell something other than flowers. She looked around. Someone was cooking.

"I must be near the kitchen."

She probably would have smelled something earlier had she been in her room for breakfast or lunch. She'd been given a warm meal before, so someone on the estate had to be cooking. Rimi had been so focused on escaping that she hadn't even thought about food.

Drawn by the scent, the consort quickly found herself in front of the kitchen. She hid behind a pillar and peeked out to see what was happening. Three middle-aged women were laughing and joking as they prepared the evening's meal. Tama, realizing there were people around, slipped down from Rimi's shoulder to hide beneath her skirt.

One of the cooks was chopping vegetables, one was stirring tang, and the last was keeping an eye on a steamer basket atop a stove.

I wonder what she's steaming. I'm curious what they're making with those vegetables too. What kind of tang is she making, anyway? Porridge? Or something more like soup?

The steam and the scent of warm food made Rimi's anxiety begin to melt away.

Steamed food always smells so good. I bet those vegetables would be delicious stir-fried too.

Lost in a daze, Rimi took a few steps deeper into the kitchen.

"Hm? Who are you, honey?" the rosy-cheeked woman chopping vegetables asked as she noticed the consort.

"Oh!" the short woman stirring the tang cried as she noticed Rimi. "That's Lady Renka's guest who showed up last night. She did mention we need to start making an extra portion, didn't she? I whipped her up some egg and rice porridge last night."

“You made that? Thank you so much,” Rimi said.

“Ohhh, stop! A little thing like that isn’t worth a thank you,” the short cook said bashfully, waving off the compliment.

“Still, you’re awfully young to be a friend of Lady Renka’s, aren’t you? Anything we can do for you?” the portly, round-faced woman in front of the stove asked with a wide smile.

Rimi was so caught up in the positive atmosphere that she couldn’t help but respond.

“It just smelled so good, I had to come and see what you were making. What are you steaming?” she asked.

“You want to see?”

“Can I?!” Rimi said with an excited grin as she darted into the kitchen.

The woman proudly opened the steam basket, releasing a plume of steam from inside. Once it cleared, Rimi could see a plump, white chicken lying on top of a bed of greens. The chicken had been rubbed with spices, which explained the delicious smell. But there was something else about it as well.

“Did you soak the chicken in wine?” Rimi asked.

“Good guess,” the cook said, surprised.

“I can smell wine in the steam. It tenderizes the meat and improves the aroma, right? I’ve always wanted to try that.”

Yo Koshin, the emperor’s personal chef, had a collection of recipes and cooking techniques. She remembered reading about the idea there.

The woman stirring tang laughed as she watched Rimi gaze at the chicken with wide, sparkling eyes.

“You know your stuff. Are you a cook?” she asked.

A cook?

Rimi blinked repeatedly. She’d crossed a sea, become a consort, and through the strange whims of fate, was now poised to be empress. Yet through it all, she’d just been cooking. The empress-to-be didn’t think she served much other

purpose.

Cooking was how Rimi connected with people. And now, smelling the scents of the kitchen, she could feel her mood improving. The consort felt like she was finally back where she belonged. The stress that had been building inside of her over the past few days began to unravel.

Yes... I am a cook. And when I was younger, I cooked as the Umashi-no-Miya. I've always been a cook.

The knowledge that Rimi might be a poison for Shohi and the empire had left her feeling like she'd lost her identity. But one thing hadn't changed since she was ten years old, and that was her joy of being in a kitchen.

There were things Rimi could change and things she couldn't. All she could really do was her best.

Chancellor Shu called me a poisonous flower. But I'm not really anybody important.

The consort had just let herself get worked up over things. But she didn't need to have an identity crisis just because the situation she had found herself in was a mess.

Rimi could feel herself growing calmer.

"Yes, I'm a cook," she said with a bright smile. "Would it be all right if I helped you?"

"You don't mind?" the round-faced woman said in surprise. "But you're our guest!"

"I don't think I'm exactly a guest. It's fine," Rimi assured her.

"Well, if you don't mind, then we don't mind!" the rosy-cheeked woman chimed in. "My wrist has been killing me for the last few days and I'm having a hard time with these veggies. Could you lend a girl a hand?"

"Of course!" Rimi said with a fervent nod.

The moment the consort tied up her sleeves, she felt the spring in her step return. She stepped over to the counter, took a deep breath, and picked up a knife. The knife was sturdy and well-balanced. It felt so satisfying to chop the

vegetables to pieces.

When the other women realized that Rimi knew what she was doing, they set her to work. Once the vegetables were done, they had her stir soup, fetch dishes, and ladle out water. They ran her in every direction, but she loved it. It felt like she was back to her true self.

“Well well, what are you doing here?”

Rimi was fanning out cucumber slices on a white plate when she heard Ryo Renka call out to her from the kitchen entrance. Everyone looked up to see Renka leaning languidly against the doorframe, pipe in hand. It seemed she'd just woken up. She must have been sleeping all day.



“Did you just wake up? You slept right through breakfast and lunch! How are you ever going to sleep at night if you sleep all day?” the rosy-faced cook scolded.

She must live a wild life.

Rimi was also surprised by the idea of a cook casually chastising her master.

“Who cares? I’m not working at the moment. Once I go back to work, I’ll go back to waking up in the morning,” Renka said.

“And how many times do we have to tell you, no tobacco in the kitchen!” the short cook exclaimed.

“It’s not in the kitchen though, is it?” Renka responded. Rimi noticed that the vice minister was indeed holding her pipe outside of the room. “Look. It’s outside.”

“You and your word games,” the round-faced cook said in disgust, but Renka didn’t seem to care. She must have been used to their lectures by now because she simply leaned her head out the door to take a puff of her pipe.

“I’ve got to say, I’m surprised you’ve turned the girl into your servant,” Renka said.

“I asked to help. I’m a cook,” Rimi quickly said.

“A cook? I don’t believe it,” the vice minister said.

“You should!”

“There’s no doubt about it, she’s a cook.”

“She knows her stuff!” the three women interjected.

“Hmm. So she says she’s a cook,” Renka mumbled to herself as she looked Rimi up and down. She then smiled, but it was unclear whether she believed the story.

Renka suddenly turned away as if she’d lost interest and stretched.

“Fine. Since you’ve finally told me something about yourself, do what you want. If you’d like to help out in the kitchen, feel free,” Renka said.

Rimi's eyes lit up.

So that means I can keep cooking?!

Until Rimi was willing to reveal her identity, she was trapped, but she was still free to move around and work in the kitchen. She would likely be able to explore the estate and learn more about Renka while she was there.

And once I know more, I can take my chance to escape.

As long as nobody knew the consort's true identity, she wasn't in any real danger. That knowledge gave her courage.

I don't need to worry about myself, do I, Lady Saigu? I just need to focus on figuring out how to escape.

Suddenly, Rimi felt like she could hear her sister.

A poison, my Umashi-no-Miya? Don't make me laugh. If you have time to mope, you have time to cook.

Rimi nodded and raised her eyes.

"I'm worried about how lazy she is."

"She's going to ruin her health."

A thought came to the consort as she listened to the cooks grumble.

"It would be nice if we could get Lady Renka to take better care of herself," Rimi said.

"It sure would. If she collapses, we'll be out of a job," the round-faced cook said with a frustrated expression.

Despite the circumstances, Rimi couldn't help but feel excited to hear there was a problem to be fixed.

"Oh! Well then, I might be able to make her some meals or snacks that would help her sleep better and wake up easier. She's already given me permission to help out in the kitchen, so would you mind if I tried to do something to help?" Rimi asked.

"We'd love to have another set of hands around here, but how's food gonna help her sleep?" the short cook asked, confused.

“There’s a school of study called cuisinology, and I know a scholar who studies it. I worked as his assistant for a while and picked up a few things in the meantime,” Rimi explained.

“Well, I’ll be! I’d love to hear more! By all means, help out however you can!” the red-faced cook exclaimed as she gave Rimi a firm slap on the back. “I’m Jo. Shorty over there is named Somi. And my roly-poly gal there is Senrai.”

“Nice to meet you all. I’m—” the consort began, but froze. She suddenly looked down, unsure what to say.

The round-faced woman named Senrai gave a concerned look.

“What’s wrong, hon?” she asked.

“I...can’t explain why, but I can’t give my name,” Rimi said.

Jo, Somi, and Senrai exchanged looks, but Somi quickly shrugged.

“Well, you did just up and appear out of nowhere. I figure it only makes sense that you’ve got your reasons. Doesn’t bother me. We’ve all got our issues,” she said.

“Still, we’ve gotta call you something. How about we give you a name?” Jo suggested.

“Oh yeah, Jo. Give her a real good one,” Somi mocked.

“Show us what you’ve got!” Senrai said, piling on.

“Oh, shut up!” Jo snapped. She then stared at the ceiling for a while before suddenly clapping her hands. “I know! You’re looking as dazed as a cat in the sun, so how about Sunshine?”

“Sunshine, eh?” Somi said with a thoughtful nod.

“Oh, what about Sunny? You fine with that?” Senrai asked, looking over her shoulder with a smile.

“Sure! Sunny will do,” Rimi agreed.

“Hear that? ‘It’ll do,’ she says,” Jo said.

The three women smiled.

It had been four days since Rimi had gone missing.

Jotetsu hadn't yet returned to the palace. Kunki had taken over the spy's duties as Shohi's bodyguard, joining every council meeting without fail and intimidating the bureaucrats with his glare. While that was happening, Hakurei was apparently investigating the movements of every person in the palace around the time of Rimi's disappearance.

Shohi knew that they were doing everything in their power, but he was still unable to rein in his panic and anger. However, he wasn't going to abandon his duties as emperor either.

Two days before, a request had come from Kan Cho'un, An's administrator. In the wake of the past chaos from within the provinces, he had asked the emperor to meet with all of the prefectural administrators.

It was a sudden request, but with the schism in the court and officials turning against the emperor, the support of the prefectural administrators would greatly strengthen Shohi's position. Therefore, the emperor had waived the usual procedures and ceremony in order to meet with them.

Meanwhile, the selection of a new Minister of Personnel was apparently plodding along. Shohi had demanded to know what was taking so long.

"I'm waiting to hear from Renka," the chancellor had curtly replied. The man had been strangely absent since the day before as well.

Is there anything else I need to do?

Shohi had met with Rihan that morning to discuss the Ministry of Works's budget request for the flood control project. Keiyu had also come with reports on the preparations for the fall festivals and setting up the inauguration ceremony. The Ministry of Works had then arrived to inform the emperor that the port towns on the south coast would need large-scale harbor renovations.

It was beginning to grow dark by the time Shohi had finished with everything, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that there was more that he needed to do. He left his office and walked briskly to his quarters. Perhaps there were papers on his desk that still needed reviewing.

Kyo Kunki stuck close behind Shohi, matching the emperor's quick pace. The man was a brilliant bodyguard who did everything he could to be as unobtrusive as possible. So the emperor was surprised when Kunki timidly called for his attention.

"Your Majesty?"

"What is it?" Shohi asked as he looked back.

Kunki seemed to be gathering his nerve for a moment.

"Please, just stop walking for a minute!" Kunki said, forcefully this time.

It was the most commanding Kunki had ever been with the emperor. Shocked, Shohi stopped in the middle of the walkway and turned to face him.

Kunki was an upstanding man with an amusing face that was smooth and round like a boiled egg. But now he looked serious, bordering on angry.

"What's the matter, Kunki?" Shohi asked.

The bodyguard kneeled and lowered his head. Shohi's eyes went wide at the sudden act.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. I realize this is impertinent," Kunki began with his eyes still facing the ground. "Please, you have to rest for a bit. I have watched you push yourself constantly. I worry about your health. Please, just take the night off."

"I am the emperor. I have to rise to meet my duties," Shohi argued.

"It seems to me that you are keeping yourself busy so you do not have time to worry about Lady Rimi. I know she wants you to be a brilliant emperor, but I do not believe she would want it to come at the cost of your health."

Kunki finally raised his head, and Shohi could see the overwhelming concern in his eyes.

"I realize that a person like me is not fit to give you advice," his bodyguard said. "If Jotetsu or Master Hakurei were here, they would be the ones to do it. But they are not, so I will say it. Please, Your Majesty, rest."

A cold breeze cut through Shohi, and he realized the gardens had already

grown dark. Guardsmen were patrolling the surrounding walkways with lanterns.

Ah. I'm making him worried.

Shohi was happy for Kunki's concern, but he was also frustrated with himself for making more people worry about him.

He's probably right. I've been trying to use work to bury my fear. I suppose I thought that maybe Rimi would like to see me like this. That it would make her happy, wherever she is.

But Kunki was right. Rimi wouldn't want Shohi to push himself like this. In fact, it would upset her. The four consorts sprang to his mind as well. He hadn't seen the consorts since Rimi's disappearance. They were surely just as worried as he was, yet he'd done nothing to comfort them.

Shohi wondered what Rimi might say if she were here.

"Kunki's right! You shouldn't push yourself," she'd probably say. "I know! Let's go see the four consorts. It'll make you feel better."

The emperor gave an embarrassed smile.

"All right," he said. On some level, it felt like he was responding to Rimi as well. "I'll relax tonight. And I think I'll go visit the rear palace tomorrow. It's been too long since I've enjoyed some tea with the consorts."

"Then let me escort you to your room!" Kunki said, his expression brightening immediately.

Shohi nodded and began walking at an easier pace this time.

It's strange...even though Rimi isn't beside me, I can feel her close by.

He couldn't help but feel stressed wondering what had happened to Rimi. Despite that, thinking about her helped to clear his mind, even if she wasn't actually with him. It was like she was still there in his heart, soothing him.

Not so long ago, the emperor would've found it unbearable to be without her. He would've been angry and unable to calm down. He couldn't help but be surprised by how he'd changed. He wondered when it had happened.

Maybe it was the confidence that no matter what happened, Rimi would care for Shohi. Even if she wasn't with him, even if she couldn't hold him, her presence in his heart was enough to calm him.

If Rimi returned safe and sound, Shohi wouldn't care if she found a corner of the rear palace to cook in or if she went off to have tea somewhere in Annei. Even if she wasn't beside him, he'd be at peace. Knowing that she was safe and that she cared for him would be enough.

It does make me feel better, but...

A thought welled up inside of him, so powerful it made the emperor want to cry out.

I miss you.

Thinking of Rimi let him carry on working with a quiet mind. Still, he wanted to see her so badly. The next time Shohi saw her, he felt as if he'd hold her tight and never let go.



To Rihan, Minister of Revenue, walked the cloister surrounding the Ministry of Revenue with long, quick strides. Late summer and early fall brought so many reports to review and decisions to make that there was never enough time. His spindly, high-strung vice minister came up beside him and hurriedly handed a letter to Rihan.

"I need you to look over this if you could. It's this year's projected tax revenue from the provinces, the three largest cities, and the two largest ports. I can explain more in tomorrow's meeting. I can have it delivered to His Majesty as well."

Rihan looked over the report as he walked. His expression was grim.

"It's to be expected after what happened with Kan Cho'un, but revenue is really down compared to last year," he said.

"Indeed. His Majesty is already aware of that, isn't he?" the vice minister said.

"I'm not worried about His Majesty. I'm worried about the idiots waiting to sink their teeth into him. I'm irritated that this is just going to give them more

reason to attack him. Ugh. Anyway, the report is fine.”

“I’ll go ahead with it then,” the vice minister said before dismissing himself. Rihan headed for his office where documents that needed his approval waited. The heavy oaken doors to his office were decorated with a carving of a snake biting a flower, which symbolized amassing wealth. The snake was split in two as the minister pushed the doors open.

He had an uninvited guest.

“What are you doing here?” Rihan spat.

“Is that really how you greet a friend? Come on,” Jin Keiyu said.

The Minister of Rites was sitting at a table in Rihan’s office. He’d apparently made a servant fetch him tea, which he was casually sipping.

Unlike the scarred, brutish-looking Rihan, Keiyu was a gentle man who constantly smiled.

“There’s a lot of festivals happening in fall, and the inauguration ceremony isn’t far off. You really have time to be sitting in someone else’s office drinking tea?” Rihan grumbled as he headed to his desk. He gave an annoyed sigh as he looked at the mountain of papers there.

“I have good people under me. I can just leave it to my vice minister,” Keiyu said.

“Being your vice minister must be miserable.”

“Why? I’d call it exciting. If anything’s miserable, it’s your obsession with work. Live a little.”

“I’m not going to join you for tea if that’s what you’re expecting.”

“Aw. And I even brought you a nice little gift.”

Rihan was just shy of telling him to get the hell out of his office, but Keiyu was just deflecting everything he said. The jovial minister took another sip of tea and crossed his legs.

“I have news about the Setsu Rimi situation. Apparently, Jotetsu’s been acting strange,” Keiyu continued.

“Strange how?” Rihan asked.

“Strange as in frequently meeting with the head of the Ho House. Usually, Lord Ho changes his carriage route constantly to hide his movements, but lately, he’s stopped doing that in order to meet up with Jotetsu,” Keiyu explained. “It seems they meet at a tea house and go elsewhere from there. I’m friendly with a servant girl who happened to tell me the news. It just seems too obvious for him. Like he’s trying to make himself easy to follow. Strange, wouldn’t you say?”

Rihan narrowed his eyes.

“Jotetsu’s meeting up with Shusei? But why?”

“Who can say? My guess is that the Hos know something about where Rimi’s gone. But the Hos get nothing from kidnapping Rimi, and I can’t imagine Shusei doing it either. It doesn’t add up.”

“I don’t see what anyone would get out of kidnapping the girl. She’s worthless,” Rihan said in disgust.

“She might be worthless, but she’s also in the way,” Keiyu immediately responded. “Or at least, some feel that way. People very close to us, even.”

“You need to think carefully before throwing around accusations,” Rihan said with a glare.

Keiyu simply smiled and coyly shrugged.

Chapter 3: Sunny, the Cook

I

Rimi was lying in bed thinking as she stared at the ceiling. She could barely make out the grass patterning on the ceiling in the soft moonlight cast from the open window. Tama was curled up and sleeping peacefully beside her.

The consort planned to wake up early the next morning so she could help prepare breakfast. She needed to fall asleep so she could be well-rested, but she was so excited to be cooking again that she couldn't.

I want to find something good to cook for Renka.

Rimi wasn't sure what Renka would do with her if the vice minister learned the empress-to-be's true identity. Still, the vice minister had taken in a mysterious girl who'd refused to identify herself. It was only natural that she wouldn't let Rimi go. Perhaps the consort was a heinous criminal or held some forbidden knowledge. If that were the case, releasing her would mean calamity. A bureaucrat like Renka had to be cautious.

She'd even compensated Rimi for holding her hostage by allowing her free roam of the estate. It wasn't clear if she opposed Shohi or was allied with Kojin, but acts like that showed she had compassion.

Things could change if Renka learned the consort's true identity. But for now, she owed the vice minister her life.

While Rimi was racked with worry, she decided to take advantage of her limited freedom to do what she enjoyed. For better or worse, the cooks were worried about Renka's chaotic lifestyle, and Rimi wanted to help them.

If I can be of some use, then maybe I can change her mind.

Perhaps Renka would let down her guard and trust Rimi, even if the consort wouldn't reveal her identity. Maybe she would even release her.

If there was one thing that Rimi had learned in her time as the Umashi-no-

Miya, it was that food had the power to change people's thinking. A belly full of delicious food had a way of softening hearts and calming fears. Sometimes a certain taste could summon up old, happy memories. It could change feelings or create new ones.

When someone told Rimi that her cooking was delicious, she felt like she belonged because she knew she had managed to touch their heart.

From what Jo, Somi, and Senrai had said, Renka stayed up late and slept in late. Even when they would bring her breakfast, she would insist that she wasn't hungry and leave the food uneaten. She would snack on treats during the day and simply pick at her lunch and dinner. Then she would stay up late again.

Our first job should be trying to get her to eat breakfast.

Rimi was certain that Renka's chaotic lifestyle started with a lack of breakfast. Without a proper breakfast, she ended up snacking throughout the day. If she started her day with a proper meal, she'd nibble on snacks less. Then, if she maintained a regular meal schedule, her body would take over and naturally tell her when to sleep and wake.

So I need to come up with something easy to eat but hearty enough to support her throughout the day...

Much of Rimi's time assisting Shusei in his cuisinology research had been spent sitting across a desk from him. During that time, he had taught her so many things, even when she hadn't asked. Though it often seemed like he was just trying to fill the awkward silence, he appeared to really enjoy talking about cuisinology.

Master Shusei...

Remembering the days when his smile was so close made her heart sting. She wondered if she'd ever get to experience that again.

If only he would change his mind. I want to go back to the days when we worked in the cuisinology hall together.

But of course, Rimi knew that Shusei would never have become their enemy if his resolve was that flimsy.

Tama's tail began to twitch, seemingly sensing the consort's chaotic feelings. Rimi stroked the agitated dragon's fur. The little creature was sensitive to human emotions, and the conflict that Rimi was feeling was affecting her sleep.

I shouldn't worry about things I can't change. Just focus on Renka's breakfast. Master Shusei always said it was the most important meal of the day.

Rimi seemed to recall he'd also said to not rely entirely on rice and wheat products. They were important, but a healthy breakfast needed more.

Suddenly, the consort recalled a breakfast Shusei had prepared for Shohi, which he'd called "the ideal breakfast." It was brown rice with mashed soybeans, which he'd forced Shohi to eat. He'd then given him a mash of various fruits and honey.

The rice was tough and the soybeans were bland, and after only three bites, Shohi complained that his stomach felt heavy. The fruit should've been delicious too, but the mashed-up concoction had an unpleasant texture and was too sweet. When he'd finished, Shohi had ordered that it never be served again.

I get the basic idea. Brown rice might be tougher than white rice, but it's better for you. Beans and fruits are good supplements as well. And honey works better than sugar to help a person wake up.

It was a good choice of ingredients, but the preparation clearly needed some work. Rimi just had to find a way of assembling the same ingredients in a way that was pleasant and easy to eat.

But no matter how you cook brown rice, it's pretty tough. And even if it's well cooked, just replacing the rice won't be enough. What should I do with it though? Rice balls? Porridge? Porridge would be the easiest to eat. But what about the soybeans? And the fruit? If I could make separate dishes, that would be the most uncomplicated way to do it, but it needs to be simple. She won't have much of an appetite, so I want to keep it to a single dish...

Suddenly, a flash of inspiration.

"I know!" she whispered, sitting up.

Rimi got out of bed as gently as she could so as not to wake Tama, put on

some clothes, and slipped out of the room. She headed straight to the kitchen and searched for brown rice and fruit. The consort had already learned where the storeroom for the ingredients was, so she quickly found what she was looking for.

Rimi scooped out a bowl's worth of rice, rinsed it, and soaked it in water. For the fruit, she took plums, figs, and some sort of citrus fruit that resembled a satsuma orange and brought them back to the kitchen. After thinly slicing the fruit, she arranged the slices on a colander and set it on the stove to warm over some coals.

The consort looked at her work with a satisfied smile. She was looking forward to the next morning.

Rimi awoke before sunrise the next day. Tama woke up with her, gave Rimi a look that said *"I'm going on a little stroll,"* and scurried out into the gardens.

Jo, Somi, and Senrai arrived in the kitchen yawning and sleepy-eyed at about the same time Rimi did, so the consort took the opportunity to propose that morning's breakfast. The cooks apparently had a hard time coming up with meals for each day, so they were intrigued by the opportunity to hear a new idea. It took only a quick explanation for the women to understand; they each took a task and went to work. Of course, Rimi was given a job as well.

The women were all skilled, efficient cooks. The way they were able to manage their work to be completed at the same time was delightful to behold.

When the product was finished, all four women tasted the result. They exchanged approving nods, satisfied with the meal considering it was a first attempt.

Normally, the cooks were charged with bringing Renka her meals, but Jo and the others suggested that Rimi bring the vice minister her breakfast. They put the food on a tray for Rimi to carry and gave her simple directions to Renka's room.

"You'll know it when you get close," they said.

Sure enough, the consort quickly found her way. All she had to do was follow

the powerful scent of tobacco. However, the door was shut tight. Rimi stood outside the room and pondered what to do.

Could she be asleep? Do I wake her up?

She glanced around and noticed a handmaid strolling along the walkway nearby.

“Excuse me? I brought Lady Renka breakfast, but, um...” Rimi called out.

“Good work,” the handmaid said at first, but she looked surprised when she came closer. “Wait, you’re the girl that Lady Renka brought. What are you doing?”

“She gave me permission to help out in the kitchen. I made her breakfast, but I’m not sure what I should do with it.”

“Is that right? I’ve never heard of a houseguest making breakfast for their host. They usually leave the food there, and I bring it in for Lady Renka to eat when she wakes up. But since you’re here, why don’t you take it to her?”

“May I? I’m a stranger here. Am I really allowed in her room?”

“She won’t care. In fact, she’ll probably find it amusing that a guest is bringing her breakfast.”

“Really?” Rimi asked, tilting her head. Renka truly seemed like an unusual woman. Most people wouldn’t want a stranger in their room, but the vice minister seemed to have a rather relaxed attitude.

Rimi thanked the woman and entered the room. She winced as the thick smell of tobacco plumed out.

The room was considerably darker than the rest of the house. With the windows tightly shut, the only light in the room was streaming through the open door. Rimi carefully moved inside but almost immediately stepped on something squishy. She looked down in surprise to see something, perhaps a tanuki or a fox, curled up underfoot.

Is that a tanuki?! Did I just step on it?!

The creature didn’t move at all, and Rimi feared she might have killed it. However, after looking closer, she realized it was just a fur scarf.

Fur? She just keeps fur laying on the floor? And in the summer?

Though summer was waning, it was still hot and humid during the day, and the room was no less sweaty. In the dim light, Rimi could make out a table. She headed toward it, but with each step, there was something new to kick out of the way or step on. When her eyesight finally adjusted to the darkness, the consort's shoulders slumped.

The table was strewn with books, scales, rulers, weights, a tobacco box, a pipe, and even the skull of some animal. There wasn't even room for the tray of food. She'd have to clear a space.

Rimi placed the tray on a chair and opened the door facing the gardens. Light flowed in, illuminating the dust floating in the air.

"Oh wow..." the consort groaned.

Now that she could see the state of the room, it was clear there was literally no safe place to step. The floor was littered with clothes for every season, more books, and measuring tools of every manner. To her horror, even the bed was a mess with tobacco implements, books, documents, and weights. There was a blanket-covered mound in the middle of the mess, which could only have been Renka.

It stinks like tobacco. Nothing would taste good in this air. The delicate aromas would be destroyed in here.

Rimi looked out the door that led to the garden. A stone table and chairs were sitting under the eaves. They were likely intended for taking in the view of the garden, but Rimi thought they'd suit her purposes fine. She placed the tray on the stone table, opened all the folding doors, and finally approached Renka's bed.

That handmaid said Lady Renka eats her breakfast when she wakes up, but I'd like for her to eat it now. It'll be best when it's warm.

The consort gently nudged at the balled-up Renka.

"Lady Renka? Lady Renkaaaa..." Rimi coaxed.

A groan came from beneath the covers.

“I have your breakfast. C’mon, eat it while it’s still warm.”

“I’ll eat it later,” came Renka’s hoarse voice.

I can’t even get her to eat.

From the look of the vice minister’s room, Rimi guessed that she was likely careless about a lot of things in her life. Her eating habits were probably one of those things. Their irregularity had become ingrained, and one couldn’t just order or beg someone out of a habit.

What should I do?

Rimi’s current position was tricky. She couldn’t afford to anger Renka. Simply dropping the matter, leaving the food there, and returning to the kitchen may have been the best option.

But Rimi couldn’t stomach the idea of just walking away. She’d served xiantang for Shohi and Hakurei when her life hung in the balance because she’d wanted them to open their hearts. She’d served zhen baozhu for the four consorts because she’d wanted them to realize their own beauty. For Shar, she’d served erguo baozi. There was the flower candy, the lijiumian, the baipinyiming, and the zizaibao. Each one had been made with purpose for someone, but ultimately, they were made to secure a place in the world for herself. She was proud of her work, and it gave her a sense of purpose. Her cooking showed her the way, and she wanted people to eat it. It was a natural desire for a cook.

Who are you?

Suddenly, Rimi could hear the Saigu’s voice.

Lady Saigu?

Empress-to-be. Poisonous flower. All the titles had come later. If Rimi had to say who she truly was, there was only one answer.

I am the Umashi-no-Miya.

All fear of upsetting Renka suddenly vanished. If she angered the vice minister, so be it. That problem could be dealt with later. The cooks had worked hard to prepare this meal, and she didn’t want to let fear put their efforts to

waste.

“After all, from what I’ve heard, you are a Wakokuan immortal in charge of providing holy communion for the gods. I have great interest in your methods as the scholar who started the field of cuisinology.”

The words of a kind cuisinologist came to mind. It felt like it had been so long since she’d heard that voice. The memory of his teasing encouragement made Rimi’s duty clear.

She closed her eyes and collected her nerves.

I want her to eat. That’s all. That is my duty.

II

Rimi took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and spoke loudly.

“Lady Renka, please wake up and eat.”

“I said later,” Renka said. Irritation had begun to seep into her voice, but Rimi persisted.

“It’s going to be best right now. Please, eat. You can go back to bed afterward if you’re still tired, but right now I want you to eat.”

“Stop nagging.”

“Jo, Somi, and Senrai all woke up early to make this for you. Get up and eat.”

“I said stop nagging!”

Renka suddenly grabbed Rimi by the arm, pulled her down, and pinned her to the bed. But when the vice minister saw who she was holding down, her eyes went wide. From the expression on Renka’s face, one would think she was the person being pinned down.

“You?! Where’s Karin?!” she cried.

Karin must have been the handmaid from before. But Rimi had no answer. All she could do was blink and stare at Renka in surprise. It seemed like she was being pinned down by an alluring man, but since Rimi knew the vice minister was a woman, she didn’t feel frightened or nervous. If anything, she felt that

Renka's roguish looks were wasted on a woman.

Noticing that the consort was completely calm, Renka furrowed her brow.

"What's with you?" she asked, seemingly perplexed by Rimi's calm demeanor. She let go and cautiously pulled away.

Rimi climbed from the bed and bowed.

"With your permission, I've begun working in the kitchen. Thank you. As a cook, I appreciate being able to work. As an expression of my appreciation, I helped prepare your breakfast and was hoping you might eat it," she said.

Renka stared at Rimi in confusion for a while before snorting.

"Ah. I see. If that's all you have to say, then get out. I'll eat it later," she said.

Renka went to pull the covers back over herself, but Rimi grabbed her hand lightly.

"Hold on! Just eat, please!" the consort pleaded.

Renka froze. Rimi could see a flicker of distaste in the woman's eyes.

"Are you giving me orders? You've got some nerve, girl."

"It's not an order, it's a request," Rimi said. "Today's breakfast tastes best when warm. Everyone worked hard on it, and I'd like for you to eat it while it's best."

Renka's eyes narrowed, and Rimi began to grow worried. She may have ruined the vice minister's mood. Still, the consort had no intention of backing down.

"It's hard to believe you can speak to me like that, knowing I'm a vice minister. You must be accustomed to seeing court officials."

Rimi was startled by Renka's insight, but she shook her head, refusing to let go.

"I don't care if you're an important bureaucrat, a commoner, or a god. I am a server and I'll do whatever that requires. It's my duty," Rimi said.

She met the vice minister's gaze and refused to look away. A tense moment passed, but Renka eventually chuckled.

“A server, eh? You say the strangest things,” Renka said. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “Fine. Let’s try this breakfast of yours.”

Renka went to slip a crimson robe over her nightgown before looking back at Rimi.

“But being prodded awake to eat breakfast by myself doesn’t sound very interesting,” she continued. “You’ll be joining me, err... Ugh, this ‘She Without A Name’ game is such a pain.”

“If you’d like a name, the cooks gave me one. It’s Sunshine. Or Sunny.”

Renka scoffed.

“You picked up a name in the kitchen? You really are a funny one. Well then, Sunny, come. Eat,” she ordered before heading out to the garden. Rimi followed her.

On the table sat a large bowl with a lid covering it. Renka sat down in a chair, uncovered the bowl, and tilted her head as she peeked inside.

“Porridge? The rice looks awfully puffy,” the vice minister said.

Renka picked up a spoon. Rimi, realizing she was planning on eating straight out of the large bowl, quickly grabbed a smaller bowl and a ladle.

“Let me dish it up for you!” she cried.

Rimi spooned some of the thick porridge into a bowl. The rice was coarsely chopped and mixed with bits of chopped soybeans and little brightly colored beads of something. The rich scent of honey wafted from the bowl as Rimi portioned it out.

“This is porridge? It smells sweet,” Renka said, looking at the bowl in confusion.

“It’s a sweet porridge. I heard you like sweets, so I suggested to the others that we sweeten it for you,” Rimi explained.

“Hmm. Well, I *do* like sweets.”

Renka’s eyebrows raised as she took a bite of the porridge. She then took a second. After the third bite, she looked across the table at Rimi.

“What’s with this rice? It’s so savory. And I can tell there are beans, but what are these little colorful bits? It smells good. They’re sour but a bit sweet too,” Renka asked.

“We left brown rice to soften in water for a long time before roasting it. Then we boiled it to make porridge and sweetened it with honey. We also roasted and chopped two kinds of beans to add to the aroma,” Rimi explained. “The colorful bits are fruit. We sliced them thinly and left them on the stove overnight to dry. Once they were about half dry, we chopped them up and mixed them in. The fruits are plums, figs, and some type of satsuma from the south.”

Brown rice was usually hard when cooked, but heating it twice helped soften it and improved the smell. By boiling it with honey and adding chopped fruit, Rimi was able to add some sweetness and acidity; the chopped, roasted beans added texture and aroma.

The ingredients were essentially the same as the “perfect breakfast” that Shusei had served Shohi once, and she’d managed to deliver it in a form that would be easy to eat for someone with such little appetite as Renka.

After another spoonful, the vice minister nodded.

“It’s good,” she said.

Rimi smiled widely.

I’m so glad.

A habit couldn’t be changed in a single morning. Renka would need to get into a pattern of eating breakfast every morning for it to stick. But this was the first step forward. A good first step could be a pleasant experience and could make her feel a little better about getting up in the morning. That would lead to a second step, a third, and eventually, it would form the foundation of a new habit.

“What do you call this?” Renka asked.

“Xingganzhou. Rise and Shine Porridge,” Rimi said.

She’d named the sweet porridge in the hopes that it would serve as the

foundation for Renka to start waking up earlier.

The vice minister pointed at the seat across from her.

“Join me, Sunny,” she ordered.

Not wanting to find out what might happen if she refused, Rimi decided to do as she was told and poured herself a bowl. She took a bite and marveled at the refreshing sweetness mixed with the savory aroma of the brown rice and beans. They’d done fine work.

I’m glad Jo did such a good job of roasting the rice. It really brings out the scent. The beans are chopped superbly too. It has a really enjoyable texture because Somi chopped the different types of beans into different sizes. And thanks to Senrai mentioning that Renka loves sweets, I was able to make it nice and sweet for her. I knew Renka would love it.

Renka polished off her bowl and stuck the empty dish out.

“I’ll take another half a bowl or so,” she said.

“Oh! Of course!” Rimi said, happily filling Renka’s bowl.

Renka turned her attention to the trees in the garden as she savored the second bowl of porridge. Her hair was unkempt and her robe was roughly pulled over her nightgown, yet her disheveled morning appearance didn’t manage to diminish the vice minister’s cool, commanding aura.

“I don’t remember the last time I felt like waking up to have breakfast. It looks like you know what you’re doing. Keep this up, and I might just offer you a job, ‘Sunny,’” Renka said.

Part of Rimi wanted to immediately turn her down, but another part of her thought the idea seemed nice. If she really was an inconvenience for Kojin and the empire, then living out her days here as a chef might be a good solution. It made Rimi happy to hear that she was a good cook and that Renka wanted to keep her there.

Living as a cook felt like it would suit her much better than being an empress.

“I didn’t spend my whole life being a good person. I know better than anyone that everybody has things that they want to hide,” Renka said. She looked up at

Rimi. "So how about it? If it works for you, it works for me."

Shohi's face floated to the surface of Rimi's mind.

Maybe that would be for the best. But I have to at least let His Majesty know I'm safe. He's too kind to not worry about what's happened to me.

She could always write him a letter that simply stated she'd found somewhere to live happily. He'd know she was fine then. But it would also break his heart. He might feel abandoned. The man was fearful and anxious regarding love. Even if it was for the good of the empire, a simple letter goodbye was just too cruel.

"I'm so grateful for the offer, and I'd love to live and work here as Sunny. I wouldn't even mind changing my name to Sunshine. I've already had to change my name once. A second time doesn't seem like a big deal. I don't know if I'll be able to work as a cook again if I go back home... But I have to go," Rimi said.

"But why? It's really that important? Is it the same reason you can't tell me who you are?" Renka asked.

"Yes, it's incredibly important. It's where I belong. That's why I need you to let me go and not ask any questions," Rimi declared, staring straight at the vice minister.

"Oh Renka. As sloppy as ever I see," a calm woman's voice interrupted.

Renka and Rimi both looked at the doorway to see a woman accompanied by a handmaid on the path outside. She seemed to be around forty and had a gentle face. Considering she had a handmaid, she must have been a woman of status.

The woman smiled softly and approached. Renka stood and bowed, so Rimi did the same.

"It's been too long, Renka. Am I really such a bother that you can't even send a message?" the woman said with a grin.

"Not at all. But what are you doing here? You rarely visit," Renka said.

"You're always so busy out in the provinces that I never get a chance to see you. So when I heard that you had some free time and had returned to the

estate, I decided to pay you a visit. You know, my husband told me that you're a candidate for Minister of Personnel. You must have received an offer by now?"

"I have."

Rimi was surprised by Renka's casual response. Keiyu and Rihan had been struggling to come up with a candidate who was unbiased between the emperor and the Hos. Apparently, Renka had been chosen.

"But you haven't sent a response, right? My husband's been pulling his hair out, so when I mentioned I was coming to see you, he asked me to find out what way you were leaning."

Renka furrowed her brow, apparently annoyed by the woman.

"You're putting me on the spot. Is that the real reason why you're here?" the vice minister asked.

"No no, I just happened to be in a position to do him a favor. I had...something else I wanted to discuss. Sit, both of you. I'll join you," the woman said. Renka and Rimi did as she asked.

"Wait outside," the woman said to her handmaid, who excused herself. She then sat down in one of the open seats and relaxed.

"A bit late for breakfast, isn't it? And you're such a mess. I remember how Father used to complain so often about you. He said people would have much more respect for you if you weren't such a slob," the noblewoman commented.

"Lucky for me I don't have any interest in being respected," Renka said.

"Oh dear. You there, what do you think of her word games?"

"Oh, err... They are splendid word games. I can't believe how pedantic she is," Rimi stammered, panicking at her sudden inclusion in the conversation.

The woman watched Rimi with a smile for a while before turning to Renka.

"I'm sorry, I intruded so suddenly that we haven't had time for introductions. Who is this, Renka?" she asked.

"Oh, she's our cook, Sunny," Renka responded.

"A cook, you say?" the woman asked, looking Rimi up and down skeptically.

“That’s right. A cook,” the vice minister responded curtly.

All Rimi could do was stare at the guest and blink. Finally, Renka noticed the consort looked lost.

“Sunny, this is Lady Yo Eika. You may call her Mrs. Yo,” Renka said.

Mrs. Yo? For some reason, that name was familiar.

“Indeed, I am Yo Eika. Chancellor Shu Kojin is my husband,” the woman said with a deep smile.

Rimi’s face went pale.

Mrs. Yo! Chancellor Shu’s wife and the woman who raised Master Shusei?!

III

I remember Master Shusei talking about her. She’s the woman who taught him calligraphy.

With her kind eyes and calm demeanor, Mrs. Yo reminded Rimi of Shusei in his cuisinologist days. Though they didn’t share blood, they had very similar auras. She’d evidently had a significant impact on him. Perhaps it was because she’d treated him so kindly as a child.

But even though she was Shusei’s adoptive mother, she was also Shu Kojin’s wife. If she learned of Rimi’s identity, it would be trouble. The consort was on edge. What was the chancellor’s wife doing here?

“S-So, how do you know Lady Renka?” Rimi stuttered while trying to keep her nerves from showing.

“My father, Yo Shibi, was a teacher. His students called him Master Yo. He took on many bright, young students. He taught them how to be scholars and bureaucrats. My husband, Kojin, was one of his students. Renka here learned under Father at the same time as him,” Mrs. Yo explained.

“So they were fellow students?” Rimi asked.

Renka appeared a good ten years younger than Kojin. It seemed impossible for them to be peers. Most people would prepare for the exams in their late

teens, meaning she would've been around ten.

"I was a bit of a special case," Renka said as she took a bite of her porridge. "After my parents died, I had nowhere to go. I was nearly starving to death when Master Yo took me in. I happened to have a knack for books and ended up becoming one of his students."

"‘A special case’ is right. She was, what, ten at the time? Yet she was able to stand next to Kojin and Seishu, Father’s best students. She was a formidable togi player as well. Renka would trounce one scholar after another in the game," Mrs. Yo continued.

If she was really able to stand shoulder to shoulder with aspiring bureaucrats at ten years old, Renka must have been an incredible child. And shockingly, she was apparently acquaintances with Kojin, Seishu, and Mrs. Yo.

The consort shivered as she realized she was indebted to someone deeply tied to the chancellor. How long would she be able to hide under the guise of Sunny?

"Kojin was still the best at togi. Even Seishu would complain about being unable to match him," Renka shared.

Mrs. Yo’s expression seemed to darken at that. The vice minister noticed and raised an eyebrow.

"What’s the matter, Eika?" she asked.

"Those were such happy days. I can’t help but wonder what happened," Yo said. Her voice dropped. "I mentioned it before, but I came here because there’s something I wanted you to hear. If you do become Minister of Personnel, you’re going to find yourself in the middle of things. Before that happens, you need to—"

Yo stopped and flicked a glance at Rimi. The consort realized the conversation might not be for her ears and rose from her seat to leave.

"Stay, I don’t mind. You don’t have a problem with that, right, Eika?" Renka asked.

"But..." Rimi said.

Yo looked at the consort and sighed.

“No, it’s fine. It’s likely common knowledge by now,” she said.

With Yo’s permission, Rimi returned to her seat. She didn’t know what they were going to talk about, but the noblewoman was Kojin’s wife. With Rimi hiding from the chancellor, whatever was about to be said could be useful.

“You know that Kojin and I have a son, right?” Yo asked.

It’s about Master Shusei!

Rimi tried to keep herself from jerking in surprise. The consort was nervous, but she watched the other women carefully.

“I haven’t seen him. But I remember hearing about some genius boy who would go to the palace to play with the emperor back when he was still a prince. As I recall, he also served as His Majesty’s grand councilor, but...” Renka trailed off and she fixed Yo with an icy look. “I hear he’s actually the trueborn son of Seishu and has become master of the Ho House? That certainly came as a surprise to me. Did you come because you decided it was finally worth informing me?”

Yo averted her eyes as she heard the venom in Renka’s voice.

“It was sixteen years ago. Kojin suddenly brought a bastard child home and told me to raise him. He wasn’t mine, but since I couldn’t have children of my own, I was just so happy to have a child. I was very proud to raise such a sweet, clever boy, so I did as Kojin said. But...”

Mrs. Yo’s voice caught in her throat. She seemed like she was in pain, as if she couldn’t breathe.

“But after twelve or thirteen years, it became so clear...his resemblance to Master Seishu. That was when I realized Kojin’s lie.”

Rimi remembered hearing that Seishu had been involved in a struggle for the throne and, in the end, had disappeared. Yo must have been so shocked to learn she had been raising a claimant to the throne. It must have been even more shocking that the one who had brought him home was the emperor’s closest advisor.

It surely threw her world into chaos. She must have been so scared.

If anyone had learned of Shusei's origins, he would've been in danger. Yo and Kojin would likely have been denounced for raising him as well.

"I had no doubt that he was Master Seishu's child. After seventeen years, the resemblance was undeniable," Yo said.

Renka's gaze turned frigid.

"I asked Kojin once what had happened to Seishu. I figured if anyone would know, it would be him. He said he had no idea. But you're saying he knew this whole time? And took Seishu's child as his own?" the vice minister asked.

Yo simply nodded, seemingly crushed by the weight of Renka's words.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Renka asked.

"It was a time of succession and the Ho House's power was waning. We hoped that nobody would notice the resemblance and time would pass without incident," Yo said.

"But Ho Neison's still alive. You really thought he'd never figure it out? And what if I'd met him?"

Yo shook her head.

"It wouldn't matter if you'd learned the truth. Ho Neison was the only risk," she explained. "But Neison had retired and never came to the palace. And even if he did find out and told our son the truth of his birth, we believed he would remain a loyal son of the Shu house. We thought his loyalty to His Majesty was absolute."

"What made you so sure?"

"Kojin was diligent in our son's education, and he laid the groundwork for our son to become vital to the emperor. That's why my husband sent him to play with His Majesty. Kojin cared for him, and Shusei must have felt that. We believed he would never cross his beloved father," Yo said. She finally looked up at Renka with pleading eyes. "But he believed that he was Kojin's son, and I have no doubt that the truth shook him. I never told him either, which I regret deeply. My husband and I never believed it could've happened, but I think the

truth upset him so badly that he decided to become head of the Ho House,”

Renka stood slowly and looked out at the garden with folded arms, seemingly deep in thought.

“You said just now that your son loved his father, but you never actually knew what he felt. Actions like these can’t simply be written off as him being upset. I don’t know what Kojin thought about raising Seishu’s child...but to me, it doesn’t seem like the lovely fairy tale you’re making it out to be,” the vice minister stated.

Yo seemed surprised and her eyes widened.

“Seishu loved Kojin like a brother. But what did Kojin think of Seishu? And I wonder how you feel about Kojin as well,” Renka continued.

“I married him,” Yo responded, clenching her eyes tight.

“You did. And how did that turn out?”

Yo’s hands, which she had laid on the table, began to tremble softly. Rimi looked from Renka’s cold eyes to Yo and immediately laid a hand on top of the noblewoman’s.

“Are you okay? How about some tea?” the consort offered.

“No thank you,” Yo said, shaking her head softly and forcing a smile. It made Rimi’s heart sting. Yo was clearly a kind woman who didn’t want Rimi to worry about her.

“You love Master Shusei, don’t you?” Rimi asked.

“Yes,” Yo said softly. “My husband is the same. Shusei is precious to him. I don’t know why Kojin never shared the truth with me, but I’m sure that he loved our son. He only showed it once. Shusei was young and Kojin gave him some baked treats he’d brought back from the Southern Trinity. Our son was so delighted... I remember telling him to slow down, that he wouldn’t have room left for dinner...”

The noblewoman’s voice trailed off as if evaporating into the air. She seemed to have lost all confidence. It had become clear to Rimi why the woman had come to see Renka. The vice minister had been close to both Kojin and Seishu,

and Yo wanted her help. She couldn't bear to see her beloved son and husband become enemies. She had come to Renka, desperate to find a solution.

"You say that Kojin cared for Shusei, but the truth is that you don't know how he felt about Seishu or how he felt about raising the man's son," Renka said coolly. "But children are sensitive and good at perceiving what adults think of them. The question is what Shusei felt from Kojin."

Did Kojin really love Master Shusei like Mrs. Yo said? Or did he lack even the slightest bit of compassion for him, and Master Shusei could tell that?

A memory occurred to Rimi, something the scholar had said at that shrine in Gisan.

"For twenty years, I have been a pawn in Shu Kojin's schemes. I believed my purpose was to serve His Majesty. But when I learned the truth of my birth and realized how long I'd been played for a fool, it all became meaningless."

Rimi could remember his voice cutting through the pounding rain.

"I realized there was only one way to enjoy the fate that had been assigned to me. I needed to take up this other life that Shu Kojin had stolen away. If I do that, perhaps I can erase this hollowness I feel."

There wasn't any one simple reason for him to join the Ho House. He must have had a lot of reasons for his decision. But his relationship with Chancellor Shu definitely played a big part. I'm sure of it.

At some point, Mrs. Yo's eyes had begun to water. She took several deep breaths to try and collect herself. She then calmly folded her hands in her lap.

"You're right, Renka. Perhaps Kojin's feelings toward Seishu have carried over to our son. It's clearly created a rift between them, but my husband took good care of Shusei. I believe that's proof that he cared for the boy, and I believe their feelings can be repaired along with that rift."

A lone tear rolled down Yo's cheek. From her hard expression, she may not have even noticed.

Renka sighed deeply and sat back down. She leaned forward and wiped the tear from Yo's face with her fingers. Yo placed her hand on her cheek and

turned away.



“You said you came here to tell me something. It’s that you want your son back, right?” the vice minister asked.

Yo’s face twisted in pain.

“Honestly, I’m such a fool. You hear about mothers who can’t let go of their children, and I suppose I’m one of them,” she chided herself. “His decision is his. If he wants to be our enemy, then I know the right choice is to allow it. I understand that. But I am a fool... I can’t bear to see him and my husband fight. It hurts too much.”

Yo’s wish resonated deeply with Rimi.

I want him back too.

The consort wanted to go back to writing in the cuisinology hall across from him. She wanted to go back to watching as Shusei treated the emperor to bizarre meals, Shohi complained, and Jotetsu made fun of them.

If it’s possible to bring him back, then...

A large part of Shusei’s decision to join the Ho House was likely his relationship with Kojin. Meaning that perhaps if they could mend the rift between them, they could then shake Shusei’s resolve to be head of the Ho House.

But for that to happen, Kojin would have to have some love for Shusei somewhere inside of him. If he felt nothing but hate for the scholar, then there was no hope. But it seemed that Mrs. Yo truly believed Kojin cared for his son.

Does Chancellor Shu care about anyone?

Frankly, Rimi couldn’t see what Mrs. Yo could. If Kojin had actually cared for his son, then Shusei wouldn’t have felt that hollowness toward his life.

But she’s spent her life as a family with the chancellor and Master Shusei. Those decades must let her see something. If she believes it, then maybe it’s possible.

Renka continued to look at Yo with dispassionate eyes. There was something complex in her gaze, not quite pity nor disdain.

“You were the flower that all the students longed for. What are you doing crying like this?” the vice minister mumbled gloomily. “But Eika, I’m powerless here. I can’t do anything about Kojin or the Ho House.”

Yo nodded and after a long moment of collecting herself, spoke again.

“Of course. I know. I knew that when I came here. But I still felt like I had to come and talk to you. You were the only student who could equal Kojin and Seishu. You were their friend.”

“Once, maybe. But I don’t think you can say that anymore. We took different paths when we left Master Yo’s, and different paths change people,” Renka said. Her expression never changed, and Rimi watched her with mixed emotions.

The last emperor was said to be a mediocre ruler, so why had Kojin become his chancellor? And why did he hide his knowledge of Seishu’s whereabouts? Did he turn his back on his friend Seishu? If he had, why did he raise the man’s son to become a bureaucrat?

Lady Renka must have some idea.

Rimi couldn’t gather anything from the vice minister’s expression.

Wind blew through the garden, making the leaves on the trees flutter. The sunlight streaming between the leaves flickered, making the entire garden look like it was shifting.

“I’ve heard what you have to say. Like I said before, I can’t do anything and I don’t plan on doing anything,” Renka announced. “But when you return home, tell Kojin I’d like him to come see me officially to speak about the Minister of Personnel position.”

“I understand. I’ll let him know, Ryo Renka,” Yo said calmly.

Chapter 4: The Warmth of Your Hands

I

Shusei was just leaving his chambers, dressed in short summer clothes with boots that reached his knees, when he ran into a man wearing a white, smiling mask. It was Mars, the person who kept his identity hidden despite having supported the Ho House for years.

The young scholar stopped to greet the masked informant.

“Perfect timing, Lord Ho. I was just planning on dropping by. There’s something I’d like to show you,” Mars said.

“And what would that be?” Shusei asked.

“This.”

Mars reached into his sleeve and pulled out a letter. After taking it, Shusei opened it and began to read. It was a message from Kojin to the Minister of War.

“Contact me at once. I want to know how the plan is progressing.”

“Where did you get this, and who found it?” the scholar asked as he blankly read the letter.

“It was apparently found in the minister’s trash. For safety’s sake, I can’t tell you who found it. However, I heard that Kojin’s messenger boy was talking about being given a secret mission,” Mars said, his voice muffled beneath his mask. “This could be Kojin attempting to bring the minister over to his side. Should we be questioning him?”

“No. I know his handiwork. We don’t need to do anything,” the scholar said with a smirk. He folded the letter and placed it in his pocket.

“What do you mean, ‘we don’t need to do anything’?” Mars asked, tilting his head quizzically. “The Minister of War could be betraying us as we speak.”

Shusei smiled, but his eyes glinted coldly.

“Do you think I’m a fool? Or are you asking honestly? If you haven’t noticed it yet, then *you’re* the fool. You may provide fast, accurate intelligence from within the court, but the Ho House has no need for fools,” Shusei said. He smirked at the masked schemer.

So, which is it?

Mars had apparently won Ho Neison’s trust over the years by assisting with his schemes. But Shusei sensed something dangerous about the mysterious man. The way he hid behind his mask was unsettling. Someone who works behind a mask has something to hide.

“You’re a harsh leader, my lord,” Mars said, grinning through the opening in his mask.

“Of course I am. Was that all? I have business to attend to,” Shusei said.

“Oh? And who will be joining you? You aren’t running around with the wrong sorts, are you?”

The accusation put Shusei on guard.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the scholar asked.

“Just that you should make sure you’re using people to their full potential, whoever they might be. Good day, then.”

Mars gave a deep, graceful bow, but Shusei just walked past him. The rustling bamboo whispered around the scholar as he headed down the walkway.

Just what is it that you’re after, Mars?

A critical moment had arrived. While dissatisfaction was mounting toward the emperor’s treatment of the provincial administrators, Shusei was gathering supporters who wanted to put the Ho House on the throne. The next move would be the last one. But there would need to be a final push before the opportunity to make his move could happen.

I have to remain patient until then. Everything will fall into place. But will I be able to find Rimi before then? It may already be too late.

Jotetsu had been visiting Ryukan's safe houses with Shusei to make the old spy feel smug and let down his guard. Ryukan, believing that the duo were searching a cold trail, had moved out, heading for a village on the outskirts of Annei named Hoboku. Jotetsu had followed him but hadn't been able to search much further for fear of Ryukan noticing him.

Still, it was an important clue. Hoboku was not in the Shu House's domain, and Shusei recalled hearing the name before. His teacher, Mrs. Yo, had mentioned it a number of times. It was the home of her father and Kojin's former teacher, Master Yo.

The scholar had been sure something was there and had requested that Jotetsu investigate. The spy had discovered a dilapidated estate that had belonged to Master Yo, but Rimi was nowhere to be found.

Soon after, Ryukan appeared to receive an order to search for something. He didn't seem to be frequenting any place that would indicate he was guarding Rimi or preparing to eliminate her.

It's strange.

The Yo estate was abandoned and forgotten. It was the perfect place for Kojin to detain someone. So why was nothing there?

Shusei had decided that he needed to personally search the estate. He and Jotetsu had devised a plan for that morning to ride out to Hoboku together. The scholar made his way to the stables, announced he'd be taking a ride to get a change of scenery, and borrowed a lively black horse.

Hoboku was some distance outside the city and up a mountain road. When Shusei arrived, he found Jotetsu waiting near the gate for him. The spy waited to make sure it was Shusei before he spurred his horse and showed him the way to Master Yo's estate.

"I'm just gonna say, Rimi isn't there!" Jotetsu shouted as they raced down the road with long, verdant grass swaying on both sides of the path.

"I know," Shusei responded.

"Then why are we going?"

“Because she should be there and she isn’t.”

After a bit of riding, a forest came into view. The roof and walls of the estate peeked through the forest growth as if the woods had swallowed it up.

The pair dismounted in front of the main gate and led their horses by hand into the garden.

“Do you see any signs of activity?” Shusei asked, scanning the overgrown weeds and trees.

Jotetsu pointed to the ground some distance away.

“It was hard to find with overgrowth like this, but I was able to make out multiple sets of human and horse tracks at the base of the grass over there. But like I said, Rimi isn’t here. I wasn’t able to find any signs of hidden rooms or underground chambers either.”

The duo hitched their horses to some of the trees before entering the dilapidated house.

There was little left inside, just some shabby beds and tables in a few of the rooms. Sunlight streamed through holes in the patchy roof, creating circles of light on the stone floor. All things considered, it was peaceful.

Part of the floor’s thick layer of dust had been disturbed by footprints leading out into the central garden. A stone building, which appeared to be a library, sat on the other side of the garden.

“What about in there?” Shusei asked, pointing at the building.

“It looked like the perfect place to hold someone prisoner, so I was hopeful,” Jotetsu said with a frown. “But no sign of Rimi. Just some chains and shackles.”

“Shackles?”

Those certainly didn’t seem like they belonged in a library. Shusei hurried toward the building. When he pulled the door open, the scent of sweet, ripe fruit wafted out.

From the bookshelves and scattered papers that remained inside, it certainly did appear to be a library. Chains with shackles had been affixed to one of the pillars, and a crumpled blanket was off to the side. Upon close inspection, he

noticed peaches sitting on one of the shelves.

Shusei crouched down to look at the shackles, then at the pillar where they were joined.

“These look old. I doubt they were only put here a year or two ago. From the rust on the adjoining plate, I’d guess it’s been thirteen years or more. There would still have been people here then,” the scholar deduced.

“Isn’t this Master Yo’s place? What would he need to chain people up for?”

“He had a lot of students, didn’t he? He might have needed a place to punish them if they crossed the line.”

Half-eaten peaches were scattered near the chains. Shusei could make out little teeth marks on them. Tiny ones. Something bigger than a rat but smaller than a dog. He pointed the fruit out to Jotetsu.

“An animal’s been chewing on those. Did you see anything around here?”

Jotetsu squatted down next to Shusei and picked up a peach.

“Looks bigger than a rat. Not a dog, though. Too small to be a weasel either,” the spy said.

“Does it remind you of the Quinary Dragon? It disappeared alongside Rimi. If those are the dragon’s teeth marks, then it’s possible that Rimi was here. Just days ago, even.”

Based on the state of the gnawed peaches, it couldn’t have been more than five days. Which meant she would’ve been here, alive, when Shusei had confronted Kojin at the Hall of Law and Culture.

She’s alive.

Hope began to bloom inside of him. He just needed to find some trace of her here, no matter how small.

Shusei tossed the shackles aside and stood. After inspecting the surrounding bookshelves and finding nothing, he crouched back down to run his hands along the stone floor. He moved slowly around the shackles, checking each stone and groove. Suddenly, he spotted something red sticking between two stones.

“Jotetsu, over here! There’s something between these stones. Can you pry it out with your sword?”

“Lemme see,” Jotetsu said. The bodyguard crouched next to Shusei to look, then he pulled out a slender bladed object from the backside of his glove. “This’ll do it.”

He slipped the blade into the groove between the stones and pried the thing from the floor. It was an earring.

Shusei picked it up and squeezed it tightly.

“It’s Rimi’s. She was here,” the scholar said.

“Let me take a look at that.”

Shusei unfurled his palm, and Jotetsu took a serious look at the earring.

“An earring with a peach-colored stone... When I first checked things out in Hoboku, I asked the village kids if they’d seen anything strange. One of them talked about finding an earring with a red stone,” the spy explained. “But they said they didn’t find it in the village. It was on a side road heading toward Sekisan.”

“Sekisan?! There’s an estate out there!”

“What kind of crackpot would build an estate way out there?”

“Ryo Renka, who just so happens to be renowned for being a crackpot. She was raised by Master Yo, so she’s connected to this place. And she’s an old acquaintance of Shu Kojin,” Shusei said.

Did that mean Renka had helped with Rimi’s kidnapping?

I’d thought Ryo Renka was keeping her distance from both the emperor and his enemies. Was I wrong?

He hadn’t anticipated it, but it wasn’t necessarily a problem.

Shusei pocketed the earring and stood up.

“I’ll request a meeting with Ryo Renka. She’s a candidate for Minister of Personnel, and I’m sure she’s already been approached by Chancellor Shu. If she’s going to be minister, I have to say my hellos as master of the Ho House

anyway.”

It's all right. She's alive, Shusei reassured himself.

II

With the announcement of Shohi's visit to the rear palace, a senior eunuch was sent to receive the emperor. Normally, the responsibility would fall to Hakurei, but he was preoccupied with searching for Rimi. Shohi headed for the Palace of Northern Peaks where the empress usually resided.

In the Palace of Northern Peaks's garden sat a pond spanned by a red, arched bridge. The lotuses had bloomed and their vividly colored petals reflected on the pond's surface. In a nearby reception hall with a view overlooking the pond, the four consorts waited around a table. When Shohi arrived, they all rose and bowed.

“Please, greetings aren't necessary,” the emperor said. “I'm here to apologize for going so long without visiting, so sit.”

Shohi took a seat, and the consorts joined him. Noble Consort So, an elegant beauty, had thoroughly adorned herself with fresh flowers as usual. Her expression felt unnaturally calm. Pure Consort Yo, always easy to read, was more obviously concerned as she looked at the emperor. The emotion was clear in her big, round eyes. Worthy Consort On was less emotive, but because of her timid nature, her eyes held a hint of concern. And Virtuous Consort Ho, ever the severe beauty, looked annoyed. Her sour mood was out of concern, and even in her displeasure, there was a certain allure.

It only took a glance to see that the four consorts were worried for Rimi. And Shohi had let them languish for days without support.

“I'm sure you've all heard about Rimi. Jotetsu and Hakurei are doing everything they can to locate her. They should find her soon. We just need to wait until then,” the emperor said.

“‘They *should* find her soon?’ You don't sound very confident,” Consort So said.

Shohi frowned at So's pointed comment.

“So you have no idea where my dearest is, then?!” Yo asked with tearful eyes.

“Jotetsu and Hakurei are taking care of it. I trust them. You don’t need to worry,” the emperor said.

Truthfully, Yo was right, but Shohi couldn’t bear the idea of worrying them any further.

“But what about you? We’re worried about you as well, Your Majesty,” On said, peering into the emperor’s eyes.

“We can’t help but worry about Rimi, but it’s surely even worse for you,” So added in her usual domineering tone.

“We are your retainers. We’re worried about our friend’s safety, but your happiness is our first concern,” Ho said.

As Shohi looked at each of the consorts, he already began to feel better. Even if they weren’t in a position to help Rimi, he was glad he could rely on them for support.

I’m blessed to have retainers like this.

Thinking back on it, Shohi realized he had Rimi to thank for that. She’d brought so many different people who revolved around him and drawn them together.

I miss her.

It was a quiet thought. He wasn’t panicking and was still able to carry out his duties to some degree. But the fact remained that he missed her, and that feeling was growing with each passing day. He felt like it might burst out of him.

Shohi bit his lip and looked out at the garden. The consorts quietly stood and gathered around him. They silently looked in the same direction as him, as if trying to share his burden.

The five of them spent some time like that, but the moment was broken by the appearance of a graceful, willowy figure.

It was Hakurei. He crossed the walkway into the hall and bowed.

“Forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty. I’ve just returned and have some

information I believe you'd like to hear," the eunuch said.

"And it had to be *right now*?" Ho snapped.

Shohi silenced the prickly consort with a light wave.

"Let's hear it. Is this about Rimi?" he asked.

The consorts suddenly stiffened, but Hakurei shook his head.

"Not exactly. I haven't found anything conclusive regarding Rimi yet. It's about Jotetsu. He mentioned that he had a lead on where Rimi might have gone. When I learned the nature of that lead, I couldn't let it go unaddressed," Hakurei explained.

"What's that supposed to mean? What was this 'lead'?" Shohi asked.

"It was Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House. It seems he and Jotetsu are working together."

The consorts exchanged glances.

"Jotetsu and Shusei? Are you sure?" the emperor asked.

"I have a number of informants I pay for information," Hakurei explained. "They've told me that Jotetsu and Shusei have been frequently seen meeting at a specific teahouse, after which they've gone to investigate various abandoned houses and buildings. They're undoubtedly cooperating. My guess is that they're searching for Rimi."

Shohi's eyes widened in shock, but it was not an unpleasant shock.

Shusei is searching for Rimi with Jotetsu.

The emperor was confident that Jotetsu would never betray him. He'd long been in a position to do so if he wished, but he had always been a faithful supporter. Whatever he was doing now, it wasn't traitorous.

If Shusei was working with someone like that, it could only be to help.

Your Majesty.

Shohi could almost hear the scholar's voice. The kind voice he'd use whenever the emperor was lost or distraught.

Ever since he was young, Shusei and Jotetsu had been by Shohi's side.

If they're working toward the same goal, then...

A possibility arose in the emperor's mind.

"Jotetsu may be assisting the Ho House," Hakurei said. It was the exact opposite of Shohi's thinking.

"Absolutely not. If Jotetsu had any interest in betraying me, he would've done it long ago. He's laid down his life to save Rimi for my sake. It would be foolish to doubt him now."

"Then why would he be working with Shusei?"

"I think it's the other way around."

"How so?"

"I think the real question is what Shusei was planning by suddenly becoming leader of the Ho House. If he joined them in order to learn their inner workings and weaken them, it would make perfect sense for him to secretly meet with Jotetsu," Shohi said.

Speaking his theory out loud made it seem more real. The idea made Shohi's heart burn.

That's it. That would explain why a man who faithfully supported me for years would suddenly turn to the Ho House.

Shusei's entire betrayal could've been one big ploy. Somewhere deep down inside, Shohi had always prayed for that to be the case. His heart swelled at the idea of that unconscious wish coming true.

If that really is why they're working together, then...!

But Hakurei looked at the young emperor with a grave expression.

"Doesn't that seem a bit convenient? Shusei is a clever man, but still," the eunuch said.

"I'm not saying it's a fact. Just that it's possible!" Shohi said.

Hakurei fell silent at the emperor's retort, but his eyes clearly showed that he was uneasy.

As the consorts listened to the conversation, So, Yo, and On's faces broke into smiles at the emperor's delight. Only Ho had a look of concern as she gazed at Shohi.





Once Shohi had left the rear palace, the four consorts returned to their own palaces. When Consort Ho arrived at the Palace of Great Purity, she was unable to sit still. She summoned a handmaid and told her to send a message to Director Sai Hakurei asking him to visit her.

I can't stand the idea of seeing his face again, but...

Just thinking about the eunuch's face was enough to turn Ho's stomach, but she needed to see him. The consort decided to wait for him in the garden's gazebo, unable to bear the idea of the man entering her chambers.

The garden was abloom with light pink cotton roses, which nodded lightly in the late summer breeze.

A while later, the handmaid led Hakurei to the gazebo. He was frustratingly, shamelessly composed as he gave a graceful bow.

"Did you need me?" he asked.

Ho dismissed the handmaid before turning back to Hakurei.

"You're the last person I want to see," she hissed.

Hakurei's golden-brown eyes twinkled with amusement as he smiled softly. Anyone but Ho would've melted beneath his alluring gaze.

"Then perhaps I should go?" he said.

"Wait. I needed to make sure of something. It's about His Majesty," Ho said.

Hakurei's expression shifted at the mention of Shohi.

"What is it?" he asked.

"His Majesty seemed hopeful that the cuisinologist became leader of the Ho House in order to assist him. What do you think?"

"What do *you* think?"

"It's absurd. Just look at how he's behaved. In no world could his actions be seen as helpful to His Majesty," Ho replied confidently.

Shohi still seemed to hold out hope for Shusei, but Ho felt it was just wishful

thinking. The cuisinologist had been relentless since he'd joined the Ho House, and no part of his actions seemed helpful to the emperor.

"I feel the same. Even if we assume he did join the Ho House to dismantle it from within, he's crossed the line. As you said, he's gone far beyond being 'helpful.' If he hopes to weaken the Ho House, there are better ways to go about doing so. Plotting and scheming to drive His Majesty into a corner isn't necessary," Hakurei said calmly. "Even if he were to appear now, kneel, and declare that everything has been for the sake of the emperor, I wouldn't accept it. Not after toying with His Majesty and sending his servants scrambling. The emperor is kind and would likely forgive him, but I doubt his retainers would be so magnanimous. And I think Shusei knows that. He's chosen to become His Majesty's foe, and he's doing everything in his power to carry out that role."

"I'm uneasy about Jotetsu's involvement in this," Ho said. "I may be a Ho, but I have no idea how far they're willing to go with their plans. I'm afraid that His Majesty's hopes will lead him to let down his guard."

When Shohi had voiced his hopes in the Palace of Northern Peaks before, Hakurei had been the only other person to show any doubt. It was why Ho had forced herself to swallow her distaste and summon him. The emperor was too softhearted to let go of his love for Shusei. Ho feared that kindness would come to harm him.

Hakurei looked down and was silent for a while, apparently lost in thought.

"I understand your worries," he finally said, nodding slightly. "I'll delve into this myself in a more dependable way."

"What are you planning?"

"Ho Neison once approached me about becoming emperor."

Hakurei met the consort's shocked expression with a smile.

"Relax. I know I don't belong on the throne," he reassured her. "But perhaps I can contact him and suggest that I've forgotten my place. I can say that Shusei's scheming awoke my slumbering ambitions."

"What are you saying?"

“I can gain information more reliably from within the Ho House. It should be easier to see what they’re planning from the inside. It may take some time, but I’ll let you know if I learn anything. Farewell.”

As Hakurei turned to leave, Ho reflexively called out to him.

“Wait! Do you realize what you’re saying?! That amounts to spying on the Ho family! If they learn what you’re doing, they won’t show any mercy!”

The eunuch stopped and looked back.

“Indeed,” he said calmly.

“That’s not your responsibility as director! It’s not what I asked you here for! I just wanted you to be aware so His Majesty doesn’t make a mistake,” Ho argued.

“If you think I’m endangering myself to satisfy your whims, then you’re mistaken,” Hakurei said coldly with a fox-like expression. “I’m doing this because His Majesty’s safety and station are at stake.”

“And I’m saying that isn’t the director’s responsibility!”

Hakurei suddenly smiled.

“Have you forgotten that His Majesty is my brother?” he asked jovially before walking away once more, his smile relaxed and self-assured.

Ho’s heart skipped a beat as she remembered the boy from her youth. She stood dumbfounded as she watched Hakurei’s willowy form depart.

It doesn’t make any sense. How could a wretched man who disgraced me so horribly risk his life for His Majesty?

No, it didn’t make sense. A lowly cur wouldn’t throw himself into danger for a brother who’d stolen his chance at the throne. Could it be that he was not a lowly man showing a moment of nobility, but a noble man who’d been playing at being lowly? Could there have been a reason for Hakurei to act so despicably toward her at Castle Seika?

Just then, Ho noticed a rustling amid the rose bushes. She looked over just as Consort So’s pet dog emerged, wagging its tail happily.

“Oh thank goodness, it’s just a dog,” Ho said.

Her blood ran cold at the idea of someone overhearing her conversation with Hakurei. If someone had learned what the eunuch was planning, he’d never have a chance to get near Ho Neison.

“Wait...”

She reflexively jumped to her feet and clapped her hands over her mouth.

That time at Castle Seika... He couldn't have... Hakurei!

III

Perhaps as a result of her breakfast, Renka decided to have lunch as well, much to the delight of the cooks who’d been working since dawn. They had apparently recognized Rimi as one of their own as well because they assigned her duties for lunch and dinner. She ended up spending the whole day working in the kitchen.

With the cleaning and prep for the following morning done, Rimi finally doused the stoves. She then returned to her room and flopped face down in bed. She was exhausted, but it was a satisfying type of exhaustion.

Tama had seemingly been waiting for the consort’s return as the little dragon hopped down from the rafters to nuzzle and sniff Rimi’s cheek.

“Sorry for making you wait here all alone, Tama. I brought you some food to make up for it. It’s on the table,” Rimi said, which made the dragon give an excited bounce and scamper over to the table.

The consort sighed into the pillow and closed her eyes. As she did, Mrs. Yo’s expression from that morning floated to the front of her mind.

She was crying when she said she wanted her son back...

Rimi understood how she felt. Painfully so. As if to accentuate her pain, the thick scent of four o’clock flowers filled the room.

If I want to eliminate the hollowness that Master Shusei feels, I need to make him see that there was meaning to the years Chancellor Shu spent raising him. If

Mrs. Yo is right and he loved and cared for Shusei...then maybe getting him to believe that will be enough to bring him back.

The bowl on the table suddenly clinked as if it had been overturned. Rimi sat up to see Tama dart away from the table and up to the rafters. The only reason the dragon would run off like that would be because she sensed someone coming.

The scent of tobacco filled the air. Rimi had left the door open to let in the breeze, and Renka appeared in the doorway, pipe in hand.

“What’s this? Having a second dinner? You certainly have an appetite,” Renka said. She didn’t bother asking permission to enter the room, just barged in and sat down on Rimi’s bed without hesitation.

“Lady Renka! What brings you here at this hour? You shouldn’t be up so late. Please, get some sleep,” Rimi said.

“I will. But first, I thought you might like to see something,” Renka said.

The vice minister pulled a letter from her pocket and tossed it onto the bed. Rimi could see part of it in the light of her bedside candle. It appeared to be a request for a meeting, but it wasn’t the contents of the letter that caught her attention, but the familiar handwriting. She couldn’t stop herself from grabbing the letter. The beautiful writing was Shusei’s.

“Something familiar about the writing?” Renka asked, noticing her reaction.

Rimi jumped and placed the letter back on the bed.

“N-No, it’s just beautiful writing, so I wanted to look,” the consort said.

She wondered why Renka would have a letter from Shusei, but then again, the woman was the Vice Minister of Works. He would surely have had correspondence with her in his duties back when he was the cuisinologist and grand councilor, but why would Renka show her the letter? Rimi began to grow uneasy.

“You’re connected to the Ho House, aren’t you? Are you one of their daughters? Or do you have some connection to the imperial court?” Renka asked.

“I don’t know what you mean. I don’t have any connection to the Ho House or the court,” Rimi lied.

“Then how did you know his name?”

Rimi, unsure of what she was asking, tilted her head in confusion.

“When Eika came this morning, she took great pains to avoid speaking the name of the boy she’d raised. She only called him her son and ‘him.’ I followed her lead, but you...called him ‘Master Shusei.’ How did you know his name?” Renka asked.

Oh no!

Rimi silently cursed her foolishness. She had essentially outed herself as someone involved with the court. And just now, she’d shown that she was familiar with Shusei’s handwriting. Renka had certainly shown her the letter to confirm whether she knew him.

It was only a matter of time before the vice minister revealed Rimi’s existence to Kojin or one of the other bureaucrats. She was angry at her own carelessness, but there was no more time for lies and excuses.

“What are you going to do with me?” Rimi asked.

“What do you want me to do with you?” Renka replied.

“I’d like for you to let me go and not ask any questions.”

Renka took a drag from her pipe, smiled grimly, and shook her head.

“We’ve been over this. I can’t do that. You didn’t call him ‘Lord Ho’ or ‘Cuisinologist.’ You called him ‘Master Shusei.’ Whatever your connection to the court is, it’s significant. I’ve clearly claimed a powerful piece. I need to know whether sending you back will put me in a stronger or weaker position.”

A stronger or weaker position...?

Rimi jerked upright.

“What I want is for you to tell me who you really are. You don’t seem to be interested in doing that, so we’ll need to come up with something else,” Renka continued.

Rimi thought carefully as she listened.

She wants me to tell her who I am, which means she isn't planning to use others to find out more about me. Doing so could put her in a weaker position. If I won't tell her my identity, she'll have to work alone to figure it out.

It was bold to let Rimi move freely around the estate, but Renka was still a cautious person. She wouldn't be so careless as to tell someone she had Rimi under her protection, which meant that the consort still had time. She could keep looking for a chance to escape.

When Renka had finished speaking, Rimi quickly made her decision.

"Then let me stay here as Sunny and don't ask any questions," the consort said.

"You drive a hard bargain, Sunny. Fine," Renka said. She returned the letter to her pocket and stood up.

Rimi suddenly reached out to grab the vice minister's sleeve.

"Lady Renka! Err... What kind of person was Master Seishu?"

"Why do you want to know?" Renka said, sitting back down with a suspicious look.

"Because I don't understand his relationship with Chancellor Shu," Rimi said. She released Renka's sleeve and looked down at the covers on the bed.

Kojin appeared to have been Seishu's friend, yet he'd gone on to serve the previous emperor. That essentially meant becoming Seishu's political enemy. Something must have caused a rift in their friendship. But then why would he raise the son of a political enemy? Wouldn't a man as ruthless as the chancellor take the opportunity to silently dispose of his lost friend's child?

Rimi felt certain that Kojin's past and Shusei's present were deeply intertwined. She wanted to know how they'd become so entangled.

"Were he and the chancellor really friends? You were with them back then, so you must know. Did something happen between them?" Rimi asked.

Renka stared out into the night and took a puff from her pipe.

“They were best friends,” she said, sending a cloud of smoke into the air. “Everyone knew it.”

Even though she was the one who asked, Rimi was surprised to get an answer. The vice minister seemed sad as she watched the smoke coil in the air.

“This is all ancient history. Maybe it was seeing Eika today, but a lot of memories have been coming back. Eika said she was happy back then, and thinking about it now, growing up with Master Yo was the happiest time of my life. I think that’s why...”

Renka stopped and gave a small, self-mocking laugh.

“I think that’s why I get the urge to go back there sometimes. That’s how I ended up finding you. I was only eleven when I met them. I was too young to be friends with any of the other students, but Seishu reached out to me. He and Kojin were inseparable, so it was inevitable that I got to know the chancellor as well.”

The candlelight flickered softly across the vice minister’s face as she continued.

“Seishu was popular and socially powerful enough to be the chief candidate for the throne. He was cheerful, intelligent, and kind to everyone. He was impeccable. I heard that Kojin’s family were merchants who worked in the Southern Trinity. When the Southern Trinity went through a civil war and they lost everything, they returned to Konkoku. They were poor and Kojin had to endure a hard life. But a provincial administrator from the Shu House noticed how clever Kojin was. They took him in and he became one of Master Yo’s students. Despite coming from different worlds, they were always together. Kojin was incredibly meek and didn’t know how to make friends, but for some reason, Seishu liked having him around.”

“So Master Seishu genuinely liked Chancellor Shu?” Rimi asked in surprise.

“He did. Honestly though, I don’t know if the sentiment was mutual. After all, Kojin had feelings for Eika, but she was so clearly in love with Seishu. Even I could see it, and I was just watching from the sidelines. The only one who couldn’t tell was Seishu. He never realized how Eika or Kojin felt. Ended up running off with some princess from the Shokukokuan imperial bloodline.

Nobody ever saw him after that.”

Rimi’s eyebrows furrowed at the mention of Shokukoku. It was a nation that had been crushed by Konkoku. Someone from their royal bloodline wouldn’t be welcome in the imperial court as it was believed that they needed to be driven out so they could never rise to oppose the empire again.

A candidate for emperor would never be allowed to marry a woman like that, which must be why they eloped.

Mrs. Yo must have given up on Seishu after that and married Kojin.

“And that’s it?” Rimi asked.

“That’s it,” Renka said with a distant look in her eyes as she stared out into the darkness. “Kojin changed after Seishu left.”

“How so?”

“He stopped smiling.”

Smiling?

Obviously, Kojin was physically capable of smiling, but it was hard to imagine. It seemed as if somewhere along the way he’d lost the ability to feel joy.

“It’s not like he smiled much to begin with, but I never saw him smile again after Seishu left. And there was the previous emperor... Well, the prince at the time. I thought Kojin hated him, but after that, the chancellor started getting close to him. The prince was famous for being a half-wit, and when Kojin, one of Master Yo’s most famous students, came to visit him, he was disgustingly overjoyed,” Renka explained. “The moment Kojin passed his tests to become a bureaucrat, the prince immediately brought him into his inner circle. Right after he became emperor, he made Kojin his chancellor too. It was later that Kojin found Seishu’s son and secretly raised him. That’s all I really know of the story.”

As Rimi listened, she couldn’t find anything that sounded like it would cause such a decisive rift between Kojin and Shusei. Two things stuck out to her though. The loss of Kojin’s smile and his sudden move to the former emperor’s side. It must have been something during that time that caused such a change in him.

How had Seishu's disappearance warped the chancellor's feelings?

"I can't tell you what was going through Kojin's head, but I can say that he seemed to enjoy being around Seishu. I know he was fond of his student days," Renka mused. "Every time they made shiguo, they'd invite me to their room. It might not have been high cuisine, but I thought it was delicious. There was something special about the way they did it."

"What's shiguo?"

"The students had big appetites. They'd usually still be hungry after dinner, so people would sneak out in the middle of the night to steal ingredients from the kitchen. They'd bring them back to their room and just throw things together in a pot. Finding your own way of turning ingredients into something delicious was a point of pride," Renka said. "Every room had their own tastes. I roomed with Master Yo's daughter back then, so I wasn't able to do it. But that's why Seishu and Kojin let me come eat with them. They'd use lots of ginger and garlic and salty broth. Piles of whole chili peppers too. It was so spicy. The secret ingredient was the ganjiang though. They'd start things off by cooking sugar and ganjiang, then they'd fry up the garlic and ginger. It would smell so good. Then they'd throw in whatever they had on hand and boil it."

As a cook, the idea of stealing ingredients from the kitchen irked Rimi, but she imagined it must have been a lot of fun for the students. The wistful expression on Renka's face attested to that.

"You asked me if something happened back then. Well, that's all I know," the vice minister said. She took a puff from her pipe and stood up to leave. However, she suddenly turned back. "Don't come to my room tomorrow. I'm expecting a guest. Stay in the kitchen like a good cook."

"Okay," Rimi said with a bow.

With that, Renka left the room, leaving behind nothing but a cloud of tobacco smoke. Rimi fell back into bed, exhausted.

So Chancellor Shu and Master Seishu were best friends. But when Seishu ran off with a woman, something changed in the chancellor. It twisted him up inside. That must have affected a lot of other things, including his relationship with Shusei.

But something remained unclear: what meaning Seishu's disappearance held for Kojin. That was likely something that only Kojin knew.

Rimi didn't know how all this would help her find a solution, but she believed the knowledge had led her closer to an answer.

But right now, I need to find an answer to my own situation.

Renka didn't seem like a callous person, but one could never know how circumstances could change things. She was too close to both Kojin and the Ho House. Now that she knew that Rimi was involved with the imperial court, Rimi had no way of knowing when Kojin might learn where she was staying. And if the consort fell back into his hands, there'd be no more escapes.

Rimi needed to escape while she still had a chance. She felt bad about abandoning her attempt to improve Renka's lifestyle so soon after starting, but she had no choice.

"I have to find a way to escape," she said to herself.

When the sun set, the gates to the estate were closed and barred. But during the day, when people were coming and going, a moment could arise where the guard left his post.

Lady Renka said she's expecting a guest tomorrow. That might be my chance.

Tama hopped down from her hiding place in the rafters, sniffed at the smoke in the air, and broke into a series of sneezes. Rimi bundled the dragon into her arms and stepped out onto the walkway.

"Tama, it might not be very comfortable, but can you stay under my skirt tomorrow?" Rimi whispered.

Why? Tama's beautiful blue eyes seemed to ask as she looked up at the consort.

"I'm going to look for a chance to escape. I feel bad for the girls after they gave me a name and let me work in the kitchen, but I have to."

With her hopes pinned on the next day, Rimi returned to bed and fell asleep.

Chapter 5: A Night to Remember

I

Shusei brought his carriage to a stop at the branching road leading to Sekisan. Jotetsu, who was waiting for the scholar there, climbed up to the carriage's window and looked in with a grave expression.

"Are you going to be all right going in alone? I can come with you," the spy suggested.

"And do what? Rescue Rimi by slaying her captors? Or riding in with His Majesty's troops?" Shusei responded.

"Tch. You know what I mean, Shusei. When did you get to be such an ass?"

The night before, Shusei had issued an official request as master of the Ho House to meet with Renka in regard to her candidacy as the potential Minister of Personnel. Considering the scholar's station, the response had been predictably quick and polite. A meeting had been set for noon the next day.

"Rescuing Rimi will be easier if I wield my house's authority, but it has to be done carefully. I can't afford to be too firm or too soft. I need to manipulate them into releasing her."

Jotetsu's abilities would allow him to slip inside and locate Rimi, but the estate was fortified with high walls and a sturdy gate, likely to ward off bandits considering its distance from Annei. Even if they found the consort, it would be difficult to get her out. The bodyguard could slay everyone in his way and breach the gate, but Jotetsu wasn't the sort of man to kill without cause.

There was also the possibility of entering the estate in the name of the emperor, but declaring Kojin a kidnapper would simply destabilize Shohi's rule. Rimi would be reluctant to name her captor if she knew it would harm the emperor. Furthermore, the more people involved with the rescue, the more likely Shohi was to hear of Rimi's circumstances. Brandishing the emperor's

name was not the right course of action.

If Jotetsu took action, he'd be forced into the preposterous situation of having to extract Rimi while defending her captors.

In the end, he has no choice but to let me go in by myself.

"Don't forget, we made a deal," Jotetsu reminded him with a slightly uneasy look. "Once you've got Rimi, you hand her over to me and stay quiet about who took her."

"Relax. I already told you what I want."

"Yeah. You said you took up leadership of the Ho House so you could enjoy your destiny. You wanna knock Kojin into the dirt and laugh at him. Well, isn't this enough? Do you really need to keep going after this?"

"I'll be the one to decide what's enough. You just focus on the task at hand."

"Yeah, yeah," Jotetsu said, dropping from the side of the carriage and disappearing behind a rock. They'd decided he would stay outside, monitor the perimeter, and create an opening.

Shusei settled into his seat as the carriage set off again. The stony roadside, dry and desolate, rolled by outside the window. It was odd to have an estate in such a deserted part of the country. But so was dressing as a man and avoiding the court in favor of the countryside.

Ryo Renka was a rare prodigy. She'd become Master Yo's student at age eleven and had even grown close to Kojin and Seishu. But as the years passed, her success waned. While her juniors like Rihan and Keiyu went on to have success, her advancement stopped at vice minister.

She'd known Kojin, Seishu, and Mrs. Yo in their youth. Shusei had been curious for a very long time about what sort of person she was. The question was how deep her ties to Kojin ran.

I don't remember Shu Kojin ever mentioning her. Mrs. Yo did occasionally, but...

If Renka was involved with Kojin, Shusei would need to treat this meeting as if he was facing the chancellor himself.

The scholar entered the estate and proceeded to a large room that faced the eastern garden. On the one hand, the grounds themselves were rather small, perhaps constrained by the sturdy walls, which made searching for Rimi a much easier affair. On the other hand, it was that much harder to move in secret. Even if Shusei could locate the consort, it would be impossible to slip out without her being seen.

The estate's design was rather modest. There were no garish colors, and while the railings and doors bore designs, they were simple patterns painted on the surface.

Shusei stepped out onto the walkway bordering the rear garden. From the view of the garden and the buildings, the scholar believed he had an idea of the entire estate's layout.

"I'm sorry for making you come all this way, Lord Ho," a voice called from behind him. "I am Ryo Renka, Vice Minister of Works."

Shusei turned to see the vice minister in the doorway, clad in a rouge shenyi and bowing. Renka was expressionless as their gazes met, and she led him to a seat. Shusei was often said to be the very image of Seishu, so he was surprised to see such a lack of reaction.

If she's in contact with Kojin, she'd know I look just like Seishu.

Shusei cautiously took a seat. Renka sat across from him.

A maid brought tea utensils and a tobacco box. She prepared some fragrant tea for Shusei before disappearing once more.

"Not at all, I appreciate you meeting with me so suddenly. I am Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House," Shusei said, introducing himself.

"I'm glad to be able to put a face to the name. You mentioned in your letter you had a reason for your visit... Ah, but before that, do you mind if I smoke? I can't seem to shake the habit, I'm afraid," Renka said.

"Not at all," Shusei said.

The moment the words had left his mouth, Renka filled her pipe from the tobacco box, lit it, and took a puff with a pleased look on her face. The vice

minister was respectful of their difference in rank, but clearly, she didn't hold any particular fear or reverence for the Ho House. She was seemingly composed enough to enjoy a smoke even with Shusei sitting before her.

"Now then, Lord Ho. What brings you to see someone as insignificant as me?" she asked.

"You're too humble. I heard you've been asked to take up the role of Minister of Personnel. The Ho House would like to see that happen as well, so we hope to be able to assist you in achieving your political goals. That's why I'm here," Shusei explained.

"I haven't decided if I want to be Minister of Personnel yet," Renka declared.

Shusei's eyes widened. It was a position that any bureaucrat would jump at.

"You haven't decided? Hasn't His Majesty requested you take the position?"

"I received Shu Kojin's request, yes. But I don't even know if I'm capable. There's a good chance I'd end up in over my head. I don't want to go out and make a fool of myself," Renka said lazily as smoke coiled around her.

Is that true? If that's truly the case, then there's no way that she and Kojin could be allied. If she was acting in Kojin's interests, she would definitely accept the role.

It seemed that Renka's ties to Kojin weren't particularly strong. That could create an opening for the Ho House.

But if she's not involved with the chancellor, then why take Rimi? Is Rimi even here?

Just as doubt was beginning to take hold of Shusei, a handmaid rushed into the room.

"Excuse me," she said before whispering something in Renka's ear. The vice minister's expression fell.

"Pardon me, Lord Ho. May I ask you to wait for a moment?" Renka asked, rising from her seat.

"By all means," Shusei said with a smile, looking up at her as he sipped his tea.

There we go.

He watched Renka and the handmaid depart before rising from his seat.

Good work, Jotetsu.

Just as planned, the spy had created a distraction during the meeting to call Renka away. His job was to wait for the right moment to appear at the gates claiming to be Kojin's messenger. He would then disappear before she arrived. In the meantime, Shusei would be able to search the estate. The vice minister wouldn't be gone long, but all Shusei needed was an opportunity to break away. He just needed to find some trace of Rimi before Renka could stop him.

The estate was small, so he felt good about his chances. It was unlikely that Rimi would be held somewhere conspicuous, so the scholar decided to focus his search on the rear parts of the estate. He slipped into the eastern garden's bamboo grove, guessing from the layout of the grounds that it would connect to the rear garden.

The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky. It looked to be late afternoon.

I'm only rescuing Rimi to ruin Kojin's plans and enjoy his humiliation. That's all.

The scholar needed to smother his feelings for Rimi but knew he hadn't managed to. Those feelings still smoldered inside of him. He couldn't get carried away by them. He had to control himself. Thus, he had pushed the consort away. He'd intentionally hurt her at the shrine in Gisan. And while he was about to save her, in the end, he'd be handing her off. Shusei needed to avoid talking to her as much as possible.

The ideal plan was to find the consort, tell her to leave if she didn't want to die a pointless death, put her on a carriage, and send her away without answering any questions. However, it was likely he'd need to threaten or bargain with Renka to make that happen.

But if she isn't even here...

That was his greatest fear. Starting the search from scratch could mean the end of Rimi's life. But then...

But then, I don't even know if she's alive.

He would simply have to deal with things as they unfolded. If he found Rimi, he would tell her he'd come to save her and then send her away. She was just a tool to help humiliate Kojin. Nothing more. And if she wasn't there, if she was already dead somewhere, it just meant Shusei had lost an opportunity to ridicule the chancellor. That was it.

And yet...

Please be alive.

He couldn't help but pray desperately. Reason and emotion clashed within him.

Some sort of fragrance filled the air. It was coming from the other side of the bamboo grove. In the rear garden, four o'clock flowers grew wild. And among them, he saw a silhouette. Shusei held his breath.



Rimi awoke before sunrise, hid Tama beneath her skirt, and headed for the kitchen. There, she worked with Jo, Somi, and Senrai to make breakfast and prepare for lunch.

Whenever she had a chance, the consort would slip over to the open gate to watch the comings and goings. Unlike at night, the gate was left wide open. However, the guard was always at his post. The stable master also wandered the area, which meant there was never an opening to escape.

I wish I could just walk up and say "They're sending me on an errand!" I doubt that would work, though. Everyone probably knows I'm not supposed to leave.

Lunch ended and evening began to approach. Still, Rimi went to the gate, unable to give up on her plan. Suddenly, she noticed a black carriage waiting outside the front building. The guest must have arrived.

If Renka was entertaining the guest, this was likely Rimi's best chance to escape. However, the visitor's carriage was a sight to behold with fine black lacquer and intricate carvings. The stable master, stable boys, and every other servant in the area had gathered around to admire it. With an entire crowd by the front gate, the consort had no choice but to retreat to the rear garden. If

only the guest had come in something a little shabbier.

The thin clouds in the sky made it easy to tell that the seasons were shifting as late summer became early fall. The sun glistened on the edges of the wispy clouds, and the garden air was rich with the scent of blooming four o'clock flowers.

As if drawn by the scent, Rimi walked down the garden path in a daze. Suddenly, she noticed a figure moving in the bamboo grove beyond the flowers. She couldn't make out a face through the dazzling sunlight, but she could tell the figure was tall and slender.

Is that Lady Renka? Or someone else?

Rimi strained her eyes to see. The figure froze for a moment before suddenly rushing toward her. She couldn't believe who she saw break through the bamboo and race past the blooming flowers.

"Master Shusei..." she said in shock.

Four o'clocks were poisonous flowers, and the scent was so thick and heady that Rimi wondered if maybe she'd been overwhelmed and had fallen into a dream.

Shusei was silent as he pushed his way through the flowers. He looked serious, even angry, as he approached. But a moment later, he had the consort wrapped in his arms. He was squeezing so hard, it was almost painful.

"Rimi! You're alive!" he exclaimed shakily.

Is this real? I can't... Is this actually real? Master Shusei? Master Shusei!

The power of his embrace, his warmth... It was real. Rimi was overwhelmed with joy, trembling so hard she was nearly convulsing.

"Master Shusei!" she cried, wrapping her arms around him.

It's him! Master Shusei!

His name filled the consort's mind as she buried herself into his arms. She couldn't think. All she felt was pure joy.



She's alive.

The scholar squeezed Rimi tightly, as if confirming she was really there in his arms. When she wrapped her arms around his back, he felt like he was going to explode with joy. He reached up with one hand to touch her beautiful, silken hair and then brought a strand to his lips.

She's alive. She's here.

Shusei knew this wasn't how he was supposed to act. He was supposed to be cold, to push her away. He was supposed to order her to leave if she wanted to live another day.

But the moment he saw Rimi safe and alive, all sense of reason evaporated. Joy, relief, and love had erupted from him. He had to hold her.

It was wrong. It risked invalidating all the attempts to push her away. Letting her see him like this left him with no excuses.

I can't do this.

But he couldn't pull away.

"Rimi..." he said. His voice shook so badly that he would not have been able to make an excuse for it even if he tried. "We're leaving. Come with me at once."

He tried to sound cold and aloof, but it was impossible when he was holding her like this. His voice brimmed with sheer joy. It was almost comical. But there was nothing he could do to help it.

Shusei had realized just how much he feared the idea of Rimi disappearing from the world.

II

He came for me...

They'd declared each other their enemies. Rimi had believed he wouldn't do anything to help her.

"Why? Why would you come for me?" she asked.

The sweet scent of his shenyi, perfumed with agarwood, enveloped her as the scholar continued holding onto her tightly.

“I’m going to get you out of here and hand you over to Jotetsu. He’s waiting for us outside,” Shusei said.

“Answer my question, Master Shusei,” Rimi insisted.

“We can talk later. Just come with me,” he said, stubbornly dodging her question.

“Why...?”

Why would Shusei do something like this? Why would he come to save her? Why would he hold her like this? The scent of the four o’clocks was so powerful, Rimi thought she was going to faint.

“Why, Master Shusei?” Rimi’s shock and happiness were so strong that she could barely get the words out.

Just then, Rimi realized she could smell something else. The scent of tobacco. Shusei seemed to notice it as well, as he suddenly looked up. They both jumped as they looked to their right.

Ryo Renka stood watching with a smirk, pipe in hand. Despite her smile, the glint in her eyes was sharp and angry.

“May I ask what you’re doing, Lord Ho?” she asked.

Rimi flinched, and Shusei reflexively squeezed her tighter.

“You treat my home as your own? Master of the Ho House or not, I will not stand for this,” Renka continued, approaching with a glare.

She found us!

Rimi had no idea what she was supposed to do. As Renka approached, Shusei shielded the frightened consort behind him.

“I apologize for wandering around your home without permission. I was so struck by its quiet, rustic charm that I ended up leaving the room without thinking to ask,” Shusei lied. “I just happened across this woman while I was wandering. I’ll be taking her with me.”

“Oh? Is she a friend of the Hos? Who is she, then?” Renka asked.

Shusei fell silent. He seemed surprised to learn that the vice minister didn’t know who Rimi was. Shusei had surely believed that Rimi’s presence here meant that Renka was conspiring with the chancellor, considering they were old friends. Realizing that wasn’t the case seemed to leave him at a loss for words. However, he quickly managed to recover.

“No, she’s not associated with my house, she just caught my eye. I’m quite enchanted with her. I’d like to take her as a lover,” he said.

A lover?

The scholar appeared to have switched strategies. Rimi looked up at him, trying to play along.

“She isn’t, is she? I see,” Renka said. “Still, I’m afraid you can’t take her. That’s our cook, Sunny. We won’t have much to eat without her around.”

“I promise I’ll provide her with a good life and treat her respectfully. If you need a cook, the Ho House can provide one,” Shusei said.

“The answer is no. I like her. If you really want her, you’ll have to use your authority to make it happen. But don’t expect me to sit by and do nothing,” Renka retorted.

Shusei sighed at the provocation and shook his head.

“The Ho House doesn’t want a fight with you,” Shusei replied. “We want your assistance to have a just and stable reign. I’m here to see you as proof of that. Conflict does us no good right now. Let’s just drop the matter.”

As Rimi trembled behind him, Shusei reached back and lightly touched her hand.

Relax. I’ll take care of it, he seemed to say.

“Will that be all then, Lord Ho?” Renka asked.

Shusei grinned. The sudden smile made the vice minister frown.

“But I’ve come all this way, haven’t I? I was hoping to hear more about my father while I was here,” he said. He closed his eyes, seemingly taking in the

smell of the flowers. “The four o’clocks are blooming, I see. It’ll be dark before long. I’d hate to ride back to Annei when it’s pitch black outside. Perhaps you’d let me stay the night? Then I’d have plenty of time to hear about my father?”

Shusei then turned to embrace Rimi.

“And if you won’t part with her, perhaps you’ll let me have her for the night?” he added.

Rimi blushed at Shusei’s sudden touch. However, there was something distant about the way he held her when he suggested they spend the night together, and there was no lust in his voice. The consort could tell immediately that this sort of thing was unfamiliar to him, but she wasn’t sure how Renka would see it. Judging by the look on her face, it was as if she had just discovered some bizarre creature. Her expression slowly softened and eventually shifted into a wicked sneer.

“I see. You’re an interesting one, Lord Ho. Ah, but if you’re declaring yourself Seishu’s son, then perhaps you’ll allow me to call you Shusei. Your father was a friend of mine, and it feels strange to speak so formally to the child of a friend. And of course, I’d love to host such a person.”

“Call me whatever you like,” the scholar replied.

Rimi couldn’t stop herself from clutching Shusei’s shenyi. Unsure what his plan was, she felt incredibly nervous. As if to comfort her, Shusei silently squeezed her waist.

“Well then, shall we have dinner? And as you wish, you may have her for the night. Assuming she doesn’t throw you out. Sunny, feel free to kick him right out the door if you like. I’ll be there to help you,” Renka said. She brought her pipe up to her lips and took a long puff. “This should be a night to remember.”

Rimi didn’t doubt it. She felt like her nerves were going to consume her. Shusei’s appearance had sent her bouncing from shock to joy, and she was feeling as if she might faint.

I don’t know what either of them is planning. What’s going to happen?!

A panicked Rimi, who had been ordered to make preparations for the night,

prepared to run off to the kitchen. However, Tama had apparently been having difficulty breathing under the consort's skirt, so once Renka had left to escort Shusei to one of the guest rooms, the little dragon had popped out from under the consort's clothes. Wearing an annoyed expression, she climbed up onto her shoulder. Rimi decided it would be better to leave Tama in her room and then headed to the kitchen.

When Rimi arrived in the kitchen, Jo, Somi, and Senrai were preparing for that night's dinner. Since a guest would be there for supper, they appeared to be making a greater variety of food than usual.

Rimi was given the task of roasting pine nuts. She stood tossing the pan over the fire in silence as she allowed her mind, which threatened to overflow with panic, to calm.

Master Shusei came for me.

While Shohi was likely also looking for her, Shusei's suspicions of Kojin had allowed him to find the consort first.

But why had he even come to save her?

Maybe Master Shusei just can't abandon someone he once cared about. If that's the case, we might have a chance to put a stop to whatever he's trying to do as leader of the Ho house right here and now.

It wasn't Shusei's sudden appearance to save her that gave Rimi hope. It was the idea that there was still some part of him that wasn't entirely cold and logical.

Mrs. Yo had mentioned something before. Something that could serve as a chance to bring her son back.

The memory of Mrs. Yo's words moved Rimi's heart. The fact that Shusei was here to save her meant that maybe his heart could be moved as well.

She mentioned that he was so happy when Chancellor Shu gave him a treat.

Maybe this was a chance to remind Shusei of the days when he was so happy, when Mrs. Yo watched over him and Kojin gave him sweets. If she could remind the scholar of happier times, perhaps she could change something inside of

him.

As Rimi roasted the pine nuts, she looked over to Senrai, who was preparing sticky rice nearby.

“What kind of baked treats would someone bring back from the Southern Trinity?” Rimi asked.

“Huh? Baked treats from the Southern Trinity? Who knows?” Senrai responded, tilting her head in confusion.

“Oh, you’re talking about wushuiping. My kids love them,” Somi chimed in.

“Wait, wushuiping is from the Southern Trinity?! But I see all sorts of shops selling them,” Jo said, butting in with a shocked expression.

“What, you didn’t know? They started making them here about fifteen years ago, I’d say,” Somi said.

“I guess they did, huh? I’m surprised you remember that. It’s been so long, but all she said was Southern Trinity treat and you were on it like a bolt of lightning,” Senrai said, bewildered.

“Well my kids won’t shut up about them,” Somi said, cackling at Senrai’s astonishment.

“Do children like them?” Rimi asked.

“Course they do. They’re sweet and smell great. You don’t know about them? What backwoods were you brought up in?” Somi said with a look of surprise.

“Oh, I was born and raised somewhere a long way from here. I mean, um, ha ha...” Rimi quickly changed the subject. “So, what are they made of? Could we make them here?”

“Well, we’ve got almost everything you need here in the kitchen, but you need imported fruit from the Southern Trinity. It’s impossible to get the aroma otherwise. Hate to break it to you, but we can’t make them. That’s why they’re pretty pricey.”

“Oh, I see,” Rimi said. It was unfortunate, but she couldn’t do anything about it. She decided to silently carry on with dinner.

As soon as the dishes were ready, a handmaid came to collect them.

Rimi really wanted to know what Shusei and Renka were talking about and what exactly the scholar was plotting. There were so many questions nagging at her. She had no idea what to do.

The consort finished preparations for the next morning's breakfast and cleaned up the kitchen before returning to her room. When she arrived, she found it in a very different state. Lanterns with bright red candles had been placed around the room and the bed covering had been replaced with an expensive-looking blanket embroidered with cotton roses. Tama sat atop the rafters with a wary look in her eye. Someone had been here.

What is this?

Suddenly Karin, the handmaid she'd met outside Renka's room, appeared with a tray bearing a bottle of red wine and cups.

"All finished with work then?" the handmaid asked as she set the tray down on the table.

"What is all this?" Rimi asked.

"What do you mean 'what is all this'? You're entertaining a guest, right?" Karin said with a giggle.

"Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose I... Wait, what?!"

Karin grabbed a thin silk robe that had been left laying on the bed and thrust it at Rimi.

"Put this on," she said.

"No, hold on, I can't!" Rimi cried.

The light pink gown was incredibly thin. One would be able to make out every detail beneath it.

"Lady Renka told me that Lord Ho specifically demanded it, so please put it on," Karin insisted.

"I-I don't want to!"

"Do it!" the handmaid ordered.

Ah! She's scary! Rimi thought, quaking.



In the garden of the Shu estate stood a detached building, Kojin's private office. Two of the walls were lined with packed bookshelves. Light streamed through the one window that hadn't been blocked off, illuminating a desk piled with letters and papers. A sofa sat in the corner of the room with a blanket bundled atop it. That was where Kojin usually slept. He rarely slept in the same room as Mrs. Yo. In fact, he rarely left his office when he was at home.

Today, Kojin had returned home early and was writing in his office.

"Honey?" Mrs. Yo called as she opened the door.

The chancellor ignored her presence and continued writing. Mrs. Yo entered the room and came up beside him.

"I met with Renka yesterday," she announced.

"Did you now?" Kojin asked without raising his eyes from his writing.

Mrs. Yo stood in silence for a moment, seemingly waiting for something. When she realized her husband had nothing more to say, she spoke again.

"I asked her about the minister position that you've been worried about."

"What did she say?" Kojin asked, finally stopping and looking up.

"You don't care about anything but work, do you?"

"I asked you what she said."

Mrs. Yo gave an annoyed huff.

"Renka said she wants to speak with you personally about it. She asked that you grant her an official visit as chancellor," she explained.

"*She's* summoning *me*? Impudent little... Fine."

Once Renka had been made minister, the chancellor would need her to comply with his wishes, so for now, he needed to appease her whims.

Kojin had known the vice minister for a long time, but he'd always had trouble figuring out what she was thinking. Seishu had always been far easier to read and manipulate. Too honest for his own good. That was what a proper

upbringing got you.

Renka had lost her parents at a young age and had already experienced many hardships before meeting Kojin. It had beaten the honesty out of her. Despite being so much younger than Seishu and Kojin, she'd been able to run circles around the both of them. She'd always given Kojin the impression that she was actually incredibly shrewd and simply hid it behind a lazy persona.

The chancellor pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and began writing a letter to the vice minister announcing his visit.

Mrs. Yo continued to stand beside him, watching his brush glide across the page.

"I told her about Shusei. She seemed surprised," she said.

Kojin snorted.

"I see... She must have been annoyed that I hadn't told her. That must be why she's making me come to her. It doesn't matter to me though. In fact, I'd do the same thing."

"It doesn't matter to you? Shusei doesn't matter to you?" Mrs. Yo asked incredulously.

Kojin continued to write, ignoring his wife. Raising Shusei had made her sentimental. The woman's opinions weren't worth his time.

"Do you remember when you gave Shusei those sweets he loved so much?" Mrs. Yo asked.

What the hell is she blathering about?

That had been when Shusei was five or six years old. A diplomat from the Southern Trinity had brought some treats as a gift. Kojin had never had a taste for sweets, so he'd decided to get rid of them by giving them to Shusei. The boy had apparently liked them so much that Mrs. Yo had been worried he'd make himself sick. After that, he'd become ecstatic whenever he got to have it again.

That was it. What possible reason could Mrs. Yo have for annoying him with this?

"Don't speak his name in my presence. I have work to do. Get out," Kojin said

with a sideways glare.

Mrs. Yo left quietly with a sad look in her eyes. She always seemed to have that look. The chancellor couldn't even remember when it had first appeared. Maybe it was when she'd given up on her hidden love for Seishu.

I suppose it was the day she became my wife.

III

"Smoke, Shusei?" Renka asked.

The moment they'd returned to the meeting room, the vice minister's entire attitude changed. She lounged on her sofa with one knee propped up, puffing away at her pipe.

I see. She's made it clear she's not going to treat me as head of the Ho House and is behaving like I'm her peer. She's impressively composed.

Shusei refused the offer with a wry smile.

"I'm having them hurry up with dinner, so it'll probably be here soon," Renka said, puffs of smoke flowing from her mouth with each word.

The scholar looked out at the sky, checking the position of the drooping sun.

Jotetsu should be jumping into action if I haven't left by nightfall.

Shusei would just have to wait until then.

The sun sank beneath the horizon, and lanterns began to light up all over the grounds. Their dinner was brought in shortly after by the handmaid. Konkokuan suppers were usually light, but when serving guests, more dishes were provided.

Red wine was accompanied by salted seafood and a bit of winter melon. Fragrant roasted pine nuts and chicken had been mixed with sticky rice and steamed in bamboo leaves to create rice cakes. There was also jitang thickened with finely grated potatoes. Lastly, dried fruit had been chopped, mixed, and used as filling for steamed buns.

It was hardly a grand banquet, but for supper, it was a sumptuous offering.

The handmaid excused herself. Renka filled Shusei's cup and then her own with wine.

"A toast?" Renka asked.

"What are we celebrating?"

Renka laughed at the scholar's question.

"Meeting an old friend's son, of course!"

Shusei watched the vice minister cautiously. She raised her cup and drained it in a single gulp, so he did the same. He picked up his chopsticks to eat but noticed that Renka continued to fill and empty her cup. Still, her eyes remained clear and her complexion didn't change.

"I'll be damned if you don't look just like Seishu, you know? When you were getting all cozy with Sunny, I couldn't help but see it," Renka said after her fifth or sixth cup. She barked a bitter laugh. "It reminded me of the days Kojin and I had to see him with his Shokukokuan princess."

Shusei put down his chopsticks.

"I always believed that Shu Kojin was my real father. My earliest memories are living with my mother. I never knew my father, but I assumed that my mother was Kojin's mistress," Shusei revealed. "She'd told me my father had died, but I thought she was just trying to hide the affair. She was a frail woman, too weak to survive in a country backwater. I thought she'd become his mistress as a way of surviving. Despite her health, she was beautiful."

"I don't know a thing about your mother. I only saw her with Seishu a few times. But I do remember that much. She seemed weak and she was definitely lovely," Renka said.

"What sort of man was Seishu...was my father?" Shusei asked.

It was an honest question born from real curiosity. The scholar was despised by Kojin and he was sure it was because of his adoptive father's hate for Seishu. He wanted to know what sort of man could inflame such hatred in his own friend.

"He was just as brilliant as Kojin and a real candidate to be the next emperor.

But he hated politics. Seishu loved people and wanted to be everybody's friend, no matter who," Renka reminisced. "It's probably why he ended up letting himself fall for a Shokukokuan royal. When his family made it clear that they wouldn't approve of the relationship, he ran off with her. He didn't care about things like power or luxury."

She took a long look at Shusei.

"You look just like him...but your whole attitude is different. I can see him in you, and yet I can't," she continued.

Shusei wondered what exactly she was saying. Suddenly, the vice minister smirked and stood up.

"This is boring. You're not your father. I'll be taking my leave. I've had a room prepared for you, so make yourself at home. Someone will be along to show you the way," she said.

Shusei was caught off guard, unable to do anything but watch as she strolled out of the room while holding her pipe.

What was she getting at? And I don't understand, I thought she was suspicious of me. That was why she kept me from taking Rimi, wasn't it? So why would she let me roam free?

Perhaps she was giving the scholar an opportunity to make the wrong move. He needed to assume his every move was being watched. Rather than do anything rash, he decided to wait patiently for the servant.

A handmaid showed Shusei to a room facing the rear garden. Realizing this would be his room for the evening, he slipped a kerchief from his pocket and secretly dropped it outside on the walkway.

"Here is your room," the handmaid said, opening the door for him.

"Thank you," Shusei said, stepping inside.

He was taken aback by what he found.

The room was decorated with lanterns containing vibrant red candles. Rimi was sitting on the bed with a mortified expression and a handmaid who had been in the room suddenly went rushing past Shusei.

“Enjoy yourselves!” she called out with a suggestive smile as she left.

Right. I did say that, didn't I?

Shusei would have to spend the night with Rimi. He'd lost his composure and held her when he'd first discovered her, but he planned to do things right this time and push her away. Still, she may not leave with the scholar if she was too suspicious of him. He needed to make her trust him while also keeping her at arm's length. Just thinking about it made him exasperated.

As he thought, Shusei took another glance at Rimi. Suddenly, he froze.

What on earth is she wearing?!

The consort was wearing a scandalously thin shenyi made of pink silk. He could make out every line of her body through the cloth. His ears burned hot as he clamped his mouth shut and looked away.



When Shusei arrived, Rimi tried to make herself as small as she possibly could on the bed. She wished she could simply evaporate. In the shenyi she was wearing, every movement showed a new curve of her body.

The scholar seemed shocked by how she was dressed. He looked away as if he'd been presented with something unsightly and sat at the table facing away from her.

“I'm sorry, I... This outfit, it's...” she stammered.

“Rather than apologizing, how about you put on something decent? I'll look away while you do,” Shusei snapped without looking back.

“I would, but...they took the ruqun I was wearing. I suppose they thought I'd change right back into it if they left it.”

Shusei reached for the wine bottle on the table and filled a cup. He gulped the wine down and refilled the cup. After his second cup, he'd calmed down enough to manage a sigh.

“Get into bed,” he ordered.

“What? Why?”

“Just hurry up and do it.”

Rimi acquiesced, slipping under the covers of the bed and pulling them up to her shoulders. Shusei then stood and approached the bed. He sat down on the bed and leaned close.

“Just stay there. Our every move is likely being watched and someone might be listening to us right now. We can’t afford to make them suspicious,” Shusei whispered in her ear. “But I believe Jotetsu will come for us tonight. I’m sure he can find a way to slip in unseen and make contact. We just need to wait for that. Afterward, we can figure out how to get you out of here.”

The scholar’s hot breath on her ear made Rimi stiffen.

Suddenly, Tama bounded down from the rafters to land on the bed. Shusei smiled at the dragon.

“I see you’re safe as well, Quinary Dragon,” he said.

Tama approached Shusei, gave her fur a quick shake, then looked up at the scholar with her big blue eyes.

“Didn’t I already say I don’t need your power?” Shusei asked, trying to push the dragon away.

Tama cocked her head in confusion and flopped over while thumping her tail on the bed. She seemed a bit displeased but made no further attempts to get closer to Shusei.

“Just stay like that until Jotetsu gets here. I can’t spend the whole time trying to look away from you,” Shusei ordered.

As the scholar went to stand, Rimi grabbed his sleeve.

“Wait, Master Shusei. I want to know something,” she said.

Shusei pressed one of his long, beautiful fingers against Rimi’s lips in an attempt to hush her.

“Please, tell me,” she said, quieter this time. “Why did you come looking for me?”

“Because Kojin has done something incredibly foolish, and I want to mock him

for it. Whatever reason he might have, he dared to kidnap the emperor's favorite consort. I plan to use mercy to humiliate him."

His words were cruel, and perhaps it was what he really intended to do. But when Shusei had found the consort, he'd embraced her as if he was overjoyed that she was safe. Maybe he didn't love Rimi romantically anymore, but it showed that he was too kind to just abandon someone he'd once cared for. That feeling of joy continued to linger, granting Rimi courage.

"But you were so happy to see me alive," Rimi said bluntly. "I know I'm just an old friend at this point, but you couldn't just leave me, could you?"

Shusei tried to get up again, but Rimi grabbed his shoulder.

"Please, tell me," she pleaded in a hushed voice.

"Drop it. Not while you're dressed like that," he whispered harshly. The scholar was blushing bright red.

But Rimi didn't want to miss this chance.

If any part of the old Shusei is still inside of him, I feel like I can still reach him. Maybe I can bring him back.

It didn't matter to Rimi what the actual reason was, whether it was for old times' sake or because Jotetsu had begged him for help. She just wanted to hear that there was still some part of the scholar's heart that could be moved. If she could just make sure that some part of his heart remained, she'd be able to believe that he could be saved.

When Rimi had come to recognize how fiercely determined the scholar was and they had recognized each other as enemies, she'd lost hope that whatever plan he'd put into motion could still be stopped. But here, now, she felt like there was a glimmer of possibility.

Shusei, still looking away, grumbled. Rimi continued clinging to him.

The air was sweet with incense. The candlelight was soft and flickering. The entire atmosphere was alluring. But Shusei remained silent, seemingly blocking all of it out.

"Please, tell me how you really feel," Rimi pleaded.

But then, it felt wrong to demand that he be the only one to reveal himself.

I have to tell him. I want to be honest with him. I want to just cut through this tangled mess.

Rimi had hidden her feelings because she feared that a relationship with the son of Seishu would make him an enemy of the entire world. But he had chosen to become master of the Ho House and rise up against Shohi.

What point was there in lying now? What point was there in dealing with the bitter pain of hiding her feelings? Even if Shusei no longer had feelings for Rimi, at this point, the worst outcome of admitting her feelings was revealing that she was a pathetic fool who didn't know how to let go.

Rimi was tired of hiding her true feelings.

"I'll tell you how I really feel. So please, tell me," Rimi said.

"I don't need you to tell me how you feel. I already know," Shusei said.

"No, you have no idea how I feel! I want to be a good servant to His Majesty and serve him for the rest of my life. His Majesty is precious to me because he's given me a place where I belong. I owe everything to him. But you're the one I love, Master Shusei."

Shusei winced as if he'd suddenly been stabbed.

"Stop. I don't want to hear this," he said.

"I love you. I always have, from the moment I met you," Rimi insisted.

"I'm your enemy!"

"I know that! I know that's what you want everyone to believe!"

Shocked, Shusei finally looked back at Rimi.

Chapter 6: Father and Son

I

I've wanted to say that for so long.

When the immediate rebellion surrounding Kan Cho'un had ended, Rimi had run into Shusei near the Palace of Twin Dragons while chasing after Tama. At that moment, the consort had believed that she understood why Shusei had become master of the Ho House. His resolve seemed so fierce that she had accepted there was no chance of swaying him from his path.

But if some kindness still lingered within him, then maybe Rimi could reach Shusei and shake his conviction. So, she decided she needed a straight answer.

"Everyone believes you joined the Ho House so you could push His Majesty off the throne and take it for yourself," Rimi said. "But when I asked you in Gisan if that's what you wanted, all you said was that you'd do what was expected of you as the child of Seishu. What's more, you pushed Tama away and said you didn't need her power. That what you wanted could only be achieved by yourself. That's because you don't want the throne."

If the scholar's goal wasn't to take the throne, what was he really doing? Even Rimi could see the reason.

"You want to destroy the Ho House from within," she concluded.

The Konkokuan court was tearing at the seams. An empire could only have one royal family, but power had been split between the Ryu and Ho houses. This was a problem that couldn't be ignored. It cast a shadow over the empire, threatening its stability. Anyone who cared about their land would want to mend such a schism. And Rimi could tell that Shusei cared.

"I believe that's what you want. I believe you joined the Ho House for His Majesty's sake. And I believe you're utterly dedicated to it, which is why I said I would be your enemy," Rimi continued, pressing on to keep the wide-eyed

scholar from offering any excuses. “Of course you felt confused and empty when you found out Chancellor Shu had manipulated your whole life. I’m sure that was part of why you left for the Ho House. You had two reasons, didn’t you? You wanted to hurt Chancellor Shu and destroy the Ho House. Well, if you can bring him to his knees with this whole mess, then you’re halfway there, right? If all that’s left is to take down the Ho House, why not go back to His Majesty and work together to find another way? Wouldn’t that be better for both of you?”

“You honestly believe that’s why I’m doing this?” Shusei asked in a gravelly voice.

“I do,” Rimi responded with complete conviction.

“You’re wrong. That’s not why I became master of the Ho House.”

“Well then, why did you?”

“You think I would tell that to an enemy?” Shusei said, pain clear in his voice.

“If I truly am your enemy, then no. But I love you. And I want to believe there’s some truth to what I’m saying. That it isn’t just some fantasy.”

“Why? Why won’t you leave me alone?!”

Apparently unable to take it any longer, Shusei suddenly grabbed Rimi by the shoulders and pinned her to the bed. She was shocked by his uncharacteristic violence, but the suffering in his expression was obvious.



“Because I want you to come back,” she replied bluntly. “Why do I have to be your enemy? Why do you have to be mine? I don’t think hurting the chancellor will help resolve your feelings toward him. But if we can clear him from your mind, then I think you’ll be halfway there. Please, be satisfied with half. There has to be another way to deal with the Ho House. If you go back to His Majesty and tell him what you’re thinking, we can return to the way things were.”

“That’s a fantasy,” Shusei said, staring into her eyes.

Both of their emotions were boiling over.

“Is it? Are you really going to tell me I’m wrong?” Rimi pressed.

Shusei clenched his eyes tight. He seemed like he was thinking about something.

“No, you’re right,” he finally whispered. The scholar opened his eyes. “It’s just like you said.”

He took a deep breath and then another.

“I wanted to hurt Shu Kojin in the hope that it would fill the emptiness inside of me. I became master of the Ho House so I could oppose him. And yes, I want to dismantle the Ho House. For His Majesty’s sake.”



The sun had set, but the Ho carriage showed no sign of emerging from Ryo Renka’s estate. Jotetsu was certain something had happened. Once the area was dark and things had grown quiet, the spy circled around to the rear of the estate.

He tossed a grappling hook over the wall. Once it had caught a ridge, he checked to ensure the rope was secure and climbed over the wall.

Shusei and Rimi aren’t going to be able to get out this way.

It was an easy enough climb for a skilled infiltrator like Jotetsu, but an amateur would have a hard time pulling himself up.

Jotetsu crept through the garden where the shadows were thickest. He suddenly caught sight of a handmaid outside a room surrounded by blooming four o’clock flowers. She appeared to be trying to listen in, her ear planted

firmly against the closed door.

Something on the ground caught the spy's eye. A handkerchief, embroidered with blue and white phoenixes, had seemingly fallen from the walkway above, right outside the door.

Shusei's in that room. And if he hasn't left yet, I'll bet Rimi's in there too. Now the question is how I get them out.

As Jotetsu considered his options, he began to circle the grounds. He soon spotted another figure in an eastern building facing out on a garden. The inside of the room looked like a disaster, but the furniture seemed to be high-quality. There was a slender, handsome man with a tobacco pipe, likely the estate's owner.

But Ryo Renka was supposed to be a woman. After a closer look, the person did seem a bit slender for a man.

That's Ryo Renka? She's pretty but a little manly for my taste.

From what Jotetsu had been able to gather, there were about fifteen servants, including the cooks and stable hands. Only the gate guards looked like they'd be able to do much in a fight. Slipping Shusei and Rimi out in secret appeared impossible, so it was starting to look like force would be their only option.

I could pretend to be a bandit, take Renka hostage, and send the servants running for ransom money. It'd be easy to let Rimi and Shusei escape in the chaos. But first, I've got to get that snooping handmaid away from them. I can take the vice minister hostage after that.

Once they were free, he could use Renka as a human shield to escape and find somewhere to let her go once he was safely out.

Jotetsu pulled a cloth up over his nose to form a mask. He was about to return to the rear of the estate when he heard a clamor from the front gate involving the neighing of horses and shouts of stable hands. Apparently, a guest had arrived.

In the middle of the night?

Suddenly, a young messenger boy appeared before Renka.

“A visitor?” the vice minister asked. She appeared to have noticed the noise outside as well.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s Chancellor Shu Kojin,” the boy said.

Renka smirked. Jotetsu’s eyes went wide.

The chancellor?! Here? Now?



To Rihan was making his way toward the Hall of the Rising Dragon when he heard Keiyu call out to him. He glanced back at his fellow minister and slowed down for a moment. Once Keiyu had caught up, the Minister of Finance quickened his pace once more.

“I heard from a messenger. Is it true?” Rihan asked.

Keiyu pulled a crumpled note from his pocket and pushed it into Rihan’s chest.

“Somebody threw this into my room,” Keiyu said. “I don’t think we can ignore this. I’m not sure if it’s some kind of prank, but...”

Rihan looked down at the note.

Ryo Renka has Setsu Rimi at her estate.

“Why would Ryo Renka have her?” Rihan asked, returning the letter to Keiyu. “What the hell could she be planning?”

“I wish I knew. But this involves our candidate for Minister of Personnel. His Majesty needs to know.”

“Where’s Chancellor Shu? I can’t believe we can’t get a hold of him at a time like this,” Rihan grumbled.

Keiyu simply shrugged.

“Wherever he is, we can’t wait around for him to get in contact. Who knows how mad His Majesty will be if he finds out we waited to inform him about this.”

The pair of ministers finished their walk to the Hall of the Rising Dragon in

silence.



“Have you heard anything from Jotetsu? Do we have an idea of where Rimi is?” Shohi asked Hakurei.

The emperor, who had received a concerned letter from the four consorts, brought their questions to the director. Hakurei had just been about to leave, but he stopped and shook his head.

“No, I have not heard anything about either of them,” Hakurei reported. “I do not know how Jotetsu’s search has progressed, but mine has been difficult. There have been no witnesses, so my only hope is to find some evidence of suspicious behavior and investigate it. But I have not been able to find any such evidence.”

“Why aren’t you working with Jotetsu?” Shohi asked.

“He has refused to work with me. I assume because of his connection to Shusei.”

Shohi could feel the cool night breeze play across his eyelashes.

I suppose Hakurei’s still worried about Jotetsu’s actions. I’m not concerned though.

If Shusei was working with Jotetsu, it only made him more hopeful. If the pair combined their talents, Rimi would definitely be found.

Shusei... I wish I could just meet with you in person and ask about this.

Ever since the scholar had become master of the Ho House, Shohi’s life had been one difficulty after another. Even so, the emperor had held onto hope. He liked to think he knew Shusei well, considering they’d grown up together. He wanted to believe his hopes weren’t just wishful thinking.

“We realize it’s late, Your Majesty...” came a voice from the doorway. It was Rihan, and Keiyu was with him.

Surprised by the unannounced arrival, Shohi and Hakurei exchanged glances. It was rare for the ministers to make nighttime visits like this. They also looked panicked.

“What is it? Has something happened? Kojin’s away at the moment,” Shohi said.

“We attempted to contact Chancellor Shu but received no response. We did not feel that we could wait,” Rihan said in a low voice.

The ministers approached Shohi and bowed. Keiyu then pulled a letter from his pocket and offered it to the emperor.

Shohi took the letter and looked over it. His eyes went wide as he read, and a shiver ran down his spine.

“Ryo Renka has Rimi?!” he cried.

“You’re joking,” Hakurei mumbled.

“What’s the meaning of this?! Who sent this letter?!” the emperor demanded.

“We do not know. Somebody threw it into my room. Whether the letter speaks the truth or not, we felt it needed to be reported to you immediately,” Keiyu said.

Shohi’s fists quivered as he clenched the letter.

It’s an anonymous letter delivered in secret. Can I take it at face value?

Ignoring the letter was always a possibility. But if the contents were true, he’d be a fool not to react accordingly.

If it was a lie, he could simply apologize to Renka. Having to apologize to his retainer as emperor would be an unpleasant outcome, but he couldn’t afford to worry about that right now.

“Kyo Kunki, where are you?!” Shohi shouted, gripping the letter.

“Here, Your Majesty,” Kunki said as he appeared from an adjoining room and kneeled before the emperor.

“Ready your forces and ride for Ryo Renka’s estate! If she offers any resistance, tell her you’re under my orders. You are free to enter by force. I don’t know if Rimi is there, but if she is, rescue her and bring any suspected kidnappers to the capital.”

Kunki appeared shocked for a moment but quickly regained his soldier's demeanor.

"By your command," he said, rising to his feet.

II

Rimi's breath was strained as she gazed into Shusei's eyes.

"Really?" she asked in a choked voice.

"Yes. But the emptiness remains," Shusei croaked. "So no, I won't stop antagonizing Kojin, and I won't step down as lord of the Ho House. Whatever my real intentions are, I can't return to His Majesty's side."

"But if we could somehow fill that emptiness, would you come back then? Would you return to His Majesty as his retainer and help him take down the Ho House?"

Shusei looked at the consort in silence. He seemed like he wanted to nod, but something inside him was fighting back against it.

Master Shusei?

He'd said her guess about his intentions had been right. So why did something still feel off? Based on his behavior, she was sure she'd been correct, but something else was wrong. It felt like he was still hiding something from her.

A sound arose outside. Rimi and Shusei both looked at the door. The scholar jumped to his feet and put some distance between himself and the bed while Rimi pulled the covers up over herself. Tama dove beneath the bed.

The door slid open, and the handmaid entered with a ruqun in hand.

"I am terribly sorry for the intrusion," she began, kneeling, "but Mistress Ryo Renka has requested that both of you collect yourselves and come to her chambers at once."

"Both of us?" Shusei asked. "For what reason?"

"Yes, both of you. I was only told that 'you will understand when you arrive,'" the handmaid said. She then placed the ruqun on the table, bowed, and left the

room.

“Why on earth would she want me there too?” Rimi asked.

“I don’t know. She seems like the capricious type. We’d best just play along,” Shusei said gravely. He picked up the ruqun and brought it over to the bed. “I haven’t heard from Jotetsu yet, but I’m sure he’ll make his move sooner or later. Until then, we should just appease Renka. I don’t know what she’s planning, but I don’t think she’ll do anything stupid to the lord of the Ho House. You change. I’ll wait outside.”

As Shusei turned to leave, Rimi grabbed his sleeve.

“Please, Master Shusei, answer me. If I can help you fill that emptiness, will you come back?” she pleaded.

The scholar’s head seemed to have cooled a bit. He cast his eyes to the floor and heaved a deep sigh.

“I have lived in the world of politics since I was born. I have my own ambition driving me to this. Ambition is a tricky thing. It’s difficult to soothe with words. Don’t expect everything to go the way you hope it will. And regardless of what my true intentions are, I am still your enemy,” he warned.

“But if you’re doing all of this for His Majesty’s sake, you aren’t actually my enemy, are you?”

“I am. I will not stop trying to be a thorn in Kojin’s side, and as long as he supports the emperor, that makes me your enemy. And as long as this ambition lives...”

Shusei suddenly went silent. He shook off Rimi’s grasp and left the room.

Ambition? What is he talking about?

Once Rimi had changed from her shenyi into the ruqun, Tama crawled out from under the bed and slipped under her skirt. Shusei was waiting outside and began walking away as Rimi emerged from the room. The consort followed, her mind whirling as she silently stared at the scholar’s back.

If I could just resolve the issue with Kojin, I feel like I could get the old Master Shusei back. But is there anything I can do? He’s so close...

They walked amid the candlelight shining from the nearby lanterns down onto the walkway. Rimi could hear the soft cry of insects from the gardens. Summer was ending, and fall would soon arrive.

The door to Renka's chambers stood open. A haze of tobacco smoke wafted out from within. Shusei reached the doorway and was about to bow when his eyes went wide.

"What is this?" he spat.

Rimi gasped as she looked past Shusei into the room. Renka was seated at the table as expected, but a surprising figure sat across from her. A man clad in a black shenyi.

Chancellor Shu!

Rimi darted behind Shusei in an attempt to hide, but it was too late. The chancellor had already seen her.

Kojin seemed just as astonished as they were. He was on his feet in an instant.

"Ah, you're here," Renka said, smoke swirling from her mouth between words. "Come in and have a seat."

But Shusei and Rimi stood motionless.

"What game are you playing, Renka?!" Kojin demanded, leaning forward to loom over the vice minister.

"No games. You said you'd be coming to visit, so I asked if tonight worked for you. What, are you busy?" she asked.

This meeting was no coincidence. Shusei stiffened as he realized he'd walked into Renka's scheme. Rimi was frightened as well.

Lady Renka, why would you do this?! What on earth are you thinking?

"I'm asking why you would call me here when *he* is around! And the girl too?!" Kojin said, his voice rising with every word.

"I happened across her at Master Yo's estate. The poor thing was chained up, so I'm putting her to work as a cook. Why, do you know who she is? Ah, but of course you would," Renka said as she knocked her pipe against the tobacco box,

emptying the ashes. She then looked up menacingly at the chancellor. “That place has long been forgotten, but it belongs to Eika. And you’re the one who manages it. You’re the one who chained her up there in the first place.”

Kojin’s jaw clenched at the accusation, but he quickly composed himself. He took a breath and sat down. He had returned to his usual, icy self as easily as donning a mask.

“You’re right. I was the one who put her there. And you may have taken her in without knowing it, but she is a threat to the entire empire. I’ll be taking her back,” he said.

“A threat to the empire?” Shusei scoffed, taking a step forward. “The chancellor is a slanderer. It should be obvious that if she falls back into his hands, her life is forfeit. I won’t let him take her.”

“Well well, it sounds like you two have quite a difference of opinion,” Renka quipped, glancing between them with a slight tilt of her head. “But first things first, you’re going to have to tell me who she is. She’s clearly no mere cook. Well, Kojin? Who is she?”

The chancellor stayed silent.

He can’t afford to tell her.

The moment Renka heard the name “Setsu Rimi,” she’d realize her captive was the empress-to-be. The chancellor would essentially be admitting that he’d imprisoned the emperor’s favorite consort and declared her a national threat.

“What’s the matter, Kojin? No answer?” the vice minister prodded. “Then what about you, Shusei? You claimed you don’t know her, but I think we both know that’s a lie. What makes you so certain that the chancellor’s claims are just slander?”

Shusei remained silent as well. With Kojin present, he couldn’t afford to give a careless answer. It would be the end of the chancellor if Shohi learned of his actions. Kojin might not stay quiet if he was cornered. He could possibly take his chances at revealing his plans to Renka in the hope that she would join him. The two were old friends who’d both received the same education under Master Yo. There was a good chance they thought similarly, in which case, the vice minister

would see Rimi as a threat too.

Of course, it was possible that Renka happened to be overwhelmingly noble and wouldn't allow the future empress to be a victim of politics. But Shusei wasn't that optimistic.

In a situation like this, neither man was willing to gamble on revealing Rimi's identity. It was one cautious player against another, leaving both unable to speak.

"So neither of you is interested in answering? Well, I'm not worried. The night is young. Like I said before, this should be a night to remember, no?" Renka said.

The doors had been left open to let in the breeze, revealing a darkened garden on the other side of the room. The vice minister turned her attention to the glittering night sky beyond the garden trees.

"Sit. Both of you," she ordered.

Rimi shrunk from Kojin's gaze, but Shusei gripped her hand and led her inside. The scholar brought her to the table and gave her a look suggesting that she sit. She responded with a fearful stare, to which he returned with a confident nod. It seemed the scholar had resolved to face Kojin and Renka head-on.

"So what exactly has inspired this idiotic game, Renka?" Kojin asked coolly.

"It's hardly idiotic. I'm just being thoughtful," the vice minister responded casually as she began to refill her pipe with more tobacco. "Shusei announced he'd be coming to pay his respects, and you stated you'd be visiting. I thought this was the perfect opportunity. You're father and son, aren't you?"

"No, we're not. I might have believed that once, but when I learned he was nothing but a stranger to me, I lost all respect and love for my father," Shusei said coldly.

"I never cared for the boy from the beginning," Kojin said, scoffing.

The cruel answer didn't seem to faze Shusei. He simply stared back at the chancellor.

"Is that right? How odd. I believe Shusei just said he 'lost all respect and love

for his father,” Renka teased. It seemed like mere banter, but something about it caught Rimi’s attention.

Odd? What about it is odd?

Nothing was odd about someone losing their love and respect for a man who deceived them. What about it would have struck her as odd?

He lost all love and respect for his father... What about that could have—

And then it came to her.

Love and respect for his father?! Of course!

Rimi’s heart began to beat excitedly.

Kojin had claimed he never cared for Shusei, but was that really true? If he never had any love for the child he raised, would the child have loved him?

Children are sensitive and can easily recognize when they aren’t loved. It’s in their nature to desperately seek out love. But if they realize it’s impossible, they give up. They grow indifferent or resentful of the ones they’re supposed to love.

He respected and loved his father. That’s what’s odd. It doesn’t make sense. There’s a contradiction within Chancellor Shu.

If Kojin truly never held a shred of love for his son, then it would make no sense for Shusei to feel any love or respect for his father. And for the chancellor to nurture Shusei, there would need to be something there in the first place to nurture him with.

Rimi could feel the edges of the picture coming into shape. She looked at Kojin, whose face had twisted into an awful scowl.

He hasn’t realized the contradiction.

Suddenly, the picture became clear.

Master Seishu’s disappearance changed Chancellor Shu. I don’t know why, but it twisted something up inside of him and made him hate Master Seishu. But he raised Shusei to be a good man despite that hate. He could’ve just killed Shusei or found some even worse fate for him.

Kojin’s contradictions created contradictory behavior.

Mrs. Yo had claimed that the chancellor loved his son. It seemed that, on some level, she was right.

Chancellor Shu is torn between his love for his friend Seishu and his hatred for him.

Those conflicting feelings made Shusei and Mrs. Yo suffer.

But those feelings contradicted each other. Was it perhaps possible that a person could have opposing feelings? To fear something while wanting to get closer to it? To adore something's purity while wanting to defile it? To love and to hate?

That means this might be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Rimi trembled with excitement as she realized she may have uncovered something enormous.

Torturing Kojin would never fill the emptiness inside of Shusei.

The only way for Master Shusei to heal is for him to realize that his days being raised by Chancellor Shu meant something to both of them. If I can help him believe that the chancellor cared for him, half his reasons for joining the Ho House should disappear. Maybe then we can bring him back.

Rimi believed that helping Kojin see the contradiction within himself would help Shusei realize the chancellor really did care about him. The problem was...

I'm afraid of him.

The chancellor was cruel and cunning. He seemed like he could see right through a person.

Shusei and Kojin sat glaring at each other in silence, as if attempting to keep the other person in place. The tension in the air felt like it could burst at any moment.

I'll never get a chance like this again. I have to use this opportunity.

As Rimi's mind raced, a familiar voice whispered in her ear.

There's only ever been one option, hasn't there?

The consort squeezed her hands in her lap as she heard the voice of her elder

sister, the Saigu.

When I want to untangle a knot, I need to find the end of the string first. I think feelings are the same. I have to figure out where things began.

The complications in Kojin's feelings began in his student days with Seishu.

That was when he became twisted up inside. That's where I need to start. The chancellor considered Seishu a friend. If I can make him realize he still feels that way, he'll begin to understand his true feelings.

Rimi looked at Renka. Suddenly, a memory returned to her.

I have to try. Sitting here and being afraid won't accomplish anything.

"Lady Renka, I just thought of a fitting meal for the memorable night ahead of us. May I have your permission to cook?" Rimi asked.

"A meal?" the vice minister questioned. Kojin and Shusei both looked perplexed.

"Yes, it would be perfect," the consort said with a nod. "And I'm a cook, after all."

Renka was silent for a while, tobacco smoke coiling around her. Rimi stared at her, refusing to look away.

I don't know what she was planning when she decided to put Master Shusei and the chancellor in a room together. But it seems like she wants to be amused. I doubt she wants a quiet, uneventful night. She'd rather watch everything go up in flames.

"I'll prepare something to make this a night to remember," Rimi asserted.

"Well, it doesn't seem like anybody wants to talk, but I doubt anybody's planning on leaving either," Renka said. The vice minister could clearly tell neither side was willing to leave and let things unfold without their knowledge. "Fine. If you're so eager, then do it."

"Thank you. Excuse me, then," the consort said, then rose from the table and left for the kitchen.

I have to try. I need to get Chancellor Shu to vividly remember how happy he was as a student and his feelings toward Master Seishu.

Rimi couldn't let this chance slip away.

The kitchen was dim, but embers still smoldered in the stove. The consort used them to light an oil lantern, and then lit the rest of the lanterns in the kitchen with its flame. After making sure she had all the spices required, she went to the storeroom to look for vegetables.

Rimi collected everything she needed, laid it on the counter, and then went to stir the embers in the stove. Rather than adding wood to it, she grabbed charcoal from a straw bag nearby, broke it into palm-sized chunks, and then laid them along the stove's opening where they could catch fire.

Afterward, Rimi went to the shelves to collect the cookware and utensils she'd need. The consort found exactly what was required: an earthenware pot and charcoal grill. As she lifted the pot by its handles, Rimi noticed it was deeper and rounder than the pots they used in Wakoku. The grill was similar though, with a clay body to hold the charcoal and a five-legged iron stand to sit on.

"This was definitely what they used," Rimi said to herself.

Tama popped out from Rimi's sleeve, clambered up to her shoulder, and wrapped herself in the consort's hair. It peeked at the pot and then at Rimi.

What're you gonna do with that? the dragon seemed to ask.

"I'm going to try and make something," Rimi mumbled.

No, I will make it, she then thought, chastising herself for her weak, anxious attitude.

The consort nodded to herself, taking the thought to heart.

It's going to be fine. I understand the basic idea. I just have to let my imagination go to work.

Rimi took a knife and began chopping garlic and ginger into chunks. She left

the pieces large, almost aggressively so.

I need to imagine what the atmosphere and technique were like. I doubt they would've been preparing the dish carefully. If anything, it was probably rushed and messy.

From the vegetable basket, she pulled onions, greens, and chives, which she chopped up. Fall mushrooms were crumbled by hand, and ripe red chilis were left almost whole, save for the ends.

Rimi had also collected dried noodles and chicken from the storeroom. The noodles were broken in half, while the chicken was chopped into chunks.

With the preparation done, the consort placed the grill on the floor and lined the bottom of it with some of the fireplace's coal. It glowed quietly in the dark as the pot was placed on top of the grill.

Once the pot had been given time to heat up, Rimi poured a bit of oil into it, followed by some sugar and ganjiang. She stirred the mixture with a wooden spatula to form a paste. A rich aroma, spicy and sweet, began to waft from the pot. The scents of garlic and ginger joined in the moment Rimi added them to the pot. Chicken went in as well, adding its aroma to the cacophony of smells as it heated up in the bubbling oil.

This smells amazing.

The powerful, appetizing aroma was exactly how Rimi had imagined it.

She stirred the chopped vegetables into the delicious-smelling mix, and then added the water, which summoned a plume of thick steam from the pot. The water settled after a moment before quickly returning to a boil. Rimi let some salty miso dissolve into the mixture and then added the raw peppers.

She stirred the stew, then poured a bit of the broth on a small plate to taste. Tama rubbed at her nose with her front paws, irritated by the potent, rising smell of the spices.

Even without jitang, kengyoken, or umifu, the chicken and vegetables give it such a rich flavor. This is really good broth.

Rimi then added the mushrooms and the broken-up noodles. It was a crude,

messy meal when judged by her own standards, and yet...

This is it. I'm sure of it.

It was just how she'd pictured it.



Come on now, bring on the show. I never get entertainment like this.

Renka smiled eagerly.

Master Yo's estate was owned by Mrs. Yo and controlled by Kojin. She'd suspected the chancellor of being the one who had imprisoned Sunny from the very beginning.

The girl was stubborn and had refused to give up her identity, but Renka could tell she was someone of high status. Her attire and the fact that she spoke to a vice minister as an equal were proof of that.

What was puzzling was her cooking skills. It didn't make any sense for her to be some noble girl. But Mrs. Yo's visit had revealed that she was likely someone close to the emperor. She'd gathered that from the way she spoke so intimately about Shusei, the former cuisinologist and grand councilor. And once Shusei had appeared to help her, it eliminated all doubt that they knew each other.

While Renka was a relatively unimportant bureaucrat who kept to the provinces, she was still part of the government. She knew an empress had been selected. She'd heard about the Saisakokuan princess coming for Qi and the implications of that. And she knew that the empress-to-be had gone missing.

It didn't take long to deduce her cook's identity.

Setsu Rimi, the future empress.

There was only one person who would be both willing and able to cross the emperor and eliminate an empress with no value: Shu Kojin.

Renka knew how the chancellor thought and why he'd want to silently remove Rimi from the picture. The moment the Saisakokuan princess had appeared, Rimi had become an obstacle. But it was such short-sighted thinking. His very life would be in danger if his actions came to light. Kojin would normally never do such a thing. It seemed he'd let himself become emotional.

As for Rimi and Shusei, judging by the way they'd been embracing among the flowers, they almost seemed like lovers. For the future empress and the lord of the Ho House to be consorting in secret... It was both shocking and strange. It also spelled massive problems for the future. But most of all, it surprised Renka how much it reminded her of a scene from the past.

It was like she was seeing Seishu and his Shokukokuan princess all over again.

And if Kojin felt the same...

The chancellor would likely find himself emotionally ripped back to the days after Seishu had disappeared.

Of course he'd be emotional. How ironic that the man who despises emotions finds himself caught up in them?

The tinder was there in front of her, so Renka decided she might as well add some fuel to the fire by inviting Shusei and Kojin to visit her at the same time. She wasn't trying to have the chancellor burn for his crimes, nor was she trying to help the scholar. It didn't particularly matter to Renka what happened to Rimi either.

Ryo Renka simply couldn't stand the situation as it stood. She hated how everything being so twisted and tangled made Mrs. Yo cry.

But if things had become too knotted up, why not cut right through the knot? Better to clear the air. Renka cared about something more fundamentally important. The offer to become Minister of Personnel would put the vice minister in a position to protect what mattered to her. It was time to set her house in order, even if that meant cleaning out all the grimy corners.

Kojin had hidden Seishu's fate from Renka, pretending the man's child was his own. He'd made Mrs. Yo cry. Anger bubbled in the vice minister's chest as she thought about the chancellor gleefully hiding the truth from Renka and his wife.

She didn't necessarily want him to be charged with a crime or denounced by the court. She simply wanted to enjoy watching him squirm. It was only fair.

Now, what will Setsu Rimi add to our little show?

The empress elect was certainly a strange one. Asking to cook at a time like

this? But Renka had allowed it. Something told her it would only enhance the evening's entertainment.



Anger was boiling inside Kojin. He didn't know what Renka was planning with all of this, but the longer he looked at Shusei, the more his rage grew. As he glared at the inscrutable, uncontrollable boy, he couldn't help but be reminded of Seishu. And with the vice minister also present in the cluttered room, memories of his student days came flooding back. It was like he'd returned to his past.

But Seishu never made a face like that.

Shusei's eyes were icy, but Seishu's had always seemed to glow with a playful light. Of course, sometimes they would become cloudy with sadness or pain. But they were never steely and unmoving like Shusei's were now.

I need to get my hands on Setsu Rimi and escape from here. Luckily, the girl apparently hasn't revealed her identity yet.

Kojin needed to find a way to trick Renka, outwit Shusei, and get away with Rimi.

Damn you, Setsu Rimi. What could that witless girl be up to?

He knew that she jumped at every opportunity to cook, but *now*? It was stupid beyond belief.

How do I navigate this?

The chancellor was at a loss as to how to make a move while also managing both Renka and Shusei. Behind his placid mask, he was panicking.



Shusei. Kojin. Renka. The air between the three of them was charged with tension. Jotetsu sat hidden in the garden, watching the exchange.

Rimi left for the kitchen. Do I just grab her and bust out of here?

Taking the opportunity to steal a horse and escape with Rimi was likely his best bet. To do that, he'd need to incapacitate the guard and open the gate. It would also mean leaving Shusei behind. But then again, the scholar was the Ho

House's master. His name would probably protect him. It was Rimi's presence that was holding them there anyway. Once she was gone, Shusei could manage the rest.

Resolved, Jotetsu hunched down and began to creep through the shadows. Suddenly, he heard the distant sound of hoofbeats. In the middle of the night? In Sekisan? The spy stopped and listened as the hoofbeats grew closer.

There were multiple sets, and they seemed to be headed straight for the estate.

What now?

Jotetsu rushed into the darkness to see what new disaster was on the way.



What have you come up with now, Rimi?

Shusei was puzzled. Rimi always had some idea in mind when she announced that she wanted to cook. But he had no clue what she could've come up with for a standoff such as this.

There's no way out as things stand.

Each of them had their own agendas holding them in place. It was like a pangolin, a scorpion, and a lion had been locked in a tiny cell together. The pangolin could eat the scorpion, but it would be eaten by the lion. The pangolin's scales could ward off the scorpion's sting, but the lion would be killed with a single stab. And the lion had nothing to fear from the pangolin, but the scorpion would only need a moment to strike.

Is Rimi trying to find an exit while she has the chance? Or does she have something else in mind?

The consort had said she wanted Shusei back. Her pained voice still rang in his heart. Those words had been far more effective at setting him off guard than her anger or hatred ever could have.

An appetizing aroma suddenly filled the room. Squeaky wheels announced Rimi's appearance as she pushed in a cart bearing a grill and a pot.

Renka appeared shocked, and Kojin's face twisted into a scowl.

The consort silently approached the table where she placed the grill. She then set out small bowls, spoons, and chopsticks.

What is this?

Rimi responded to Shusei's questioning gaze with a smile, though it almost seemed more intended to encourage herself.



Rimi's mind whirled with anxiety from the moment she wheeled the cart into the room. Still, she tried to comfort herself with the belief that there was hope to be found in the situation.

An unease like nothing she'd ever felt clawed at the consort. The look in Kojin's eyes was confused, disjointed, and suspicious. It was like his gaze was being reflected in every direction.

Don't let this chance go to waste. Please, remember, Rimi prayed with her eyes closed.

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya.

The voice of her Saigu sister rang sharply in the consort's ears.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am.

The Umashi-no-Miya opened her eyes.

"I've prepared something fitting for the occasion. Please, enjoy."

Chapter 7: A Familiar Face and a Bygone Spring

I

Kojin furrowed his brow as he noticed the change in Rimi's demeanor.

What's happened to the girl? There's something different about her.

The consort, who had seemed so fidgety and anxious before, had calmed down. She almost seemed confident. The change unnerved Kojin, but the feeling only lasted a moment. He took a deep breath and crossed his legs.

In battles of wits and wills, the one to lose their composure admits defeat first. Kojin had learned that from experience. He felt as if the girl was challenging him, so he prepared himself.

"Fitting? This?" Kojin snorted.

Rimi responded with a smile and removed the lid from the pot. The smell grew stronger, spreading throughout the entire room.

What is this? Stew?

She prepared three bowls and set them before each person at the table.

"Please, enjoy," Rimi insisted.

Kojin refused to move. If this was a challenge from the impertinent consort, then it was vital he not play by her rules.

Shusei and Renka both took their chopsticks and began to eat. Rimi did nothing. She simply stood silently beside the table.

There has to be a point to this, doesn't there?

Perhaps stubbornly refusing to engage was precisely what she wanted. In which case, a simple bite would be enough. The chancellor took his spoon, filled it with broth, and swallowed it.

It was good. It tasted exactly how he liked it. Dried noodles had been added

directly into the stew rather than being boiled first to soften them. It had given the broth a little added texture, just how Kojin preferred it.

But that was enough. The chancellor laid his spoon down and looked up.

Renka on one side of him, Shusei on the other. For a moment, their faces seemed to blur. Something felt off about his surroundings. What was happening?

Calm yourself. Nothing is happening. I'm just sitting with Renka and Seishu.

The thought made Kojin jerk. He'd just thought he was with Seishu.

Wait, I know what this is!

The chancellor didn't know what Rimi was planning, but he was certain she'd intended this meal for either himself or Renka. Perhaps even both of them.

Kojin balled his fist on the table.



Renka ate in silence with a nostalgic look on her face. Shusei continued to eat as well, though he'd turn a confused glance to Rimi from time to time.

Kojin refused to move for a while before he finally took a single bite, then laid his spoon back down. Immediately after, his expression tightened, and his face went pale.

"This is shiguo," Rimi announced. "Lady Renka informed me that Chancellor Shu and Master Seishu enjoyed this in their student days."

"I missed this," Renka uttered.

Please. Remember.

Rimi was certain that there was a time when Kojin had been happy and his feelings hadn't been twisted up, back when he had spent his days beside Seishu. She believed the reason Renka could speak so happily of the times she'd joined them for shiguo was because the joy that Kojin and Seishu brought had made it a happy place to be. She was sure that Kojin had once loved Seishu with an unclouded heart.

Even if the chancellor's feelings had changed, even if his heart had grown

turbulent, those feelings of friendship were still there. The roots of their friendship must have spread wide, and she believed those roots remained. It was what brought about the contradictions within him.

His deep friendship with Seishu had given way to his love for Shusei. Rimi could see it. Now she just wanted Kojin to listen to his heart once more. To realize how he felt about Seishu and, by extension, Shusei.

“It brings back memories, doesn’t it, Kojin?” Renka mumbled.

Kojin looked up slowly.

“Memories? Right...memories,” the chancellor said softly.

Is he remembering?!

Just as a smile was about to break out on Rimi’s face, Kojin turned his gaze to her. The darkness in his eyes made her recoil.

Those eyes...

He then looked down at the pot in front of him. His expression was devoid of any particular emotion.

“Seishu and I used to make this. Renka would eat with us as well. Seishu would pilfer the ingredients from the kitchen while I did the cooking,” Kojin recounted. “I remember Eika caught us once. She gave us a dirty look but agreed not to tell Master Yo. Another time, Renka knocked the pot over and ruined our books.”

The emotionless way the chancellor recalled the memories sent a chill down Rimi’s spine.

“It’s been a long time since I thought about it. It just occurred to me now. So, there you go. Is that all you wanted from me?” he asked.

Rimi looked at the chancellor as if he were something entirely alien.

Chancellor Shu said he remembered, but...

But the memories didn’t seem to have moved him in the slightest.

His memories don’t carry any feelings with them.

From what Renka had said, Kojin had almost certainly viewed Seishu as a

close friend once. So how could he recall the sights and sounds of his past without feeling any sort of happiness or friendship?

Or did he never care for Master Seishu in the first place? Did he spend all those happy times with a friend and not feel a thing the whole time?

Rimi believed that food had the power to move the heart. She believed that her ability to see what kind of food someone needed was what gave her purpose. But if someone's heart was empty, was there anything she could do? What power did an Umashi-no-Miya who serves people food for the heart have when faced with such a person?

People can't just...not feel. Can they?

Rimi's vision began to blur, making her feel as if she was having a dizzy spell.

Can they? Could someone like that exist?

"I've had enough of this farce. I'm leaving," Kojin said as he stood up.

"And leave behind the threat to the empire?" Renka asked as he turned to leave.

"Do what you want with her," the chancellor responded without turning back.

As Kojin disappeared from the room, Rimi suddenly felt as if her feet had turned to piles of sand beneath her. Her knees buckled. Shusei noticed and caught the consort moments before she crumbled to the ground.

"Careful!" he cried.

Renka sat with her chin in her hand, staring vacantly at the pot of shiguo. She seemed lost in thought, sulky, and perhaps a bit bored.

Rimi stared at the doorway that Kojin had disappeared through, overwhelmed by the feelings of powerlessness.



“Is there truly nothing I can do for him? How do I help someone who doesn’t feel?” the consort asked.

Dread closed in on her. She never imagined someone could have memories without any feelings attached to them. But the chancellor had recalled the past without a shred of feeling.

“Did I serve the wrong thing?” the consort mumbled to herself.

Rimi wanted Kojin to remember the past and re-experience all the emotions from back then. The food had certainly brought back memories, so she couldn’t have made it wrong. The memories had just not produced any feelings.

“Unless...he genuinely doesn’t feel.”

Lady Saigu? Lady Saigu! Tell me, did I do something wrong?! Can a person who doesn’t feel actually exist?! Or... Or is there something else I...

Rimi cried out desperately for her sister, but there was no answer. Her vision began to blur once more.

“You might be right. Kojin might not actually feel anything,” Renka said listlessly, continuing to stare at the shiguo.

The words sent a shiver of horror down Rimi’s spine. If that was true, then the consort was powerless against him, which meant she could do nothing to bring Shusei back.

“No. All living things feel,” Shusei said tiredly. “It’s essential for survival. The appearance of danger triggers feelings of disgust. Safety and comfort create joy. You can’t lose something instinctual like that. Some say that human emotions are too complicated to be simply instinctual, but they’re a way to help us survive. Simple creatures only need simple emotions. But people are complex, so they’re born with complex feelings. Even if those feelings become twisted, they can’t disappear.”

Rimi was clinging to Shusei’s chest tightly, still so lost that she could barely breathe. The scholar suddenly and almost violently grabbed her by the shoulder and tried pushing her away.

“Stand up,” he said.

But the consort's legs wouldn't respond to her. Shusei stared intently at her.

"I already told you, I'm your enemy. Don't expect me to coddle you," he said harshly.

His voice was enough to shock Rimi and make her stumble back a few steps. Without him to support her, she collapsed to the floor. Shusei simply watched coldly as it happened.

"I thought you were an immortal who offers up holy sacraments. For those who seek answers, it's all over when you stop thinking. So think," he continued calmly.

Rimi looked up.

Well...maybe it is over for me...

A sharp voice cut through Rimi's thoughts like a bolt of lightning.

Yet an Umashi-no-Miya you remain!

Lady Saigu?

In response to her sister's voice, Shusei's words began to bubble to the surface of her mind.

"Even if those feelings become twisted, they can't disappear."

If that was true, Rimi's fears of a person who didn't feel were misplaced.

"So think."

Shusei wasn't telling Rimi that it was over for her. He was telling her that it would be over if she stopped thinking, which meant she could only do one thing.

I'll just have to think.

She tried to focus herself. Her legs still wouldn't support her, but she opened her eyes and stared intently at a spot on the stone floor.

Think! Think!

First, she had to better understand the situation. Kojin had recalled the past but had shown no signs of any emotion. Then he'd stood up and left. That was

all.

But wait...

He stood up and left?

The chancellor had wanted to take Rimi away at all costs. Anything else would spell disaster for him. Yet he'd stood up and left her behind.

Why?

II

Kojin's feet moved quickly, his hand tacked onto his brow as he walked down the cloister toward the garden.

I think I hallucinated back there. Did the girl slip something into my shiguo?

Seishu had once slipped raw chilis into the stew and laughed about it when Kojin had furiously confronted him. His mirthful voice resounded through the chancellor's mind.

"It's wonderful to see you come out of your shell!" he'd said.

Adding raw chilis to the shiguo became a custom for them after that. Sometimes Seishu would end up getting a bite of a spicy pepper and groan about how hot it was. Then it was Kojin's turn to laugh.

Seishu was always laughing, always cheerful. The chancellor could still remember the first time he'd seen his roommate sad. It was when he was with the Shokukokuan girl. He'd spotted them through the bamboo in an embrace. Seishu was holding his beloved, yet he looked miserable.

Visions of the past swirled in Kojin's mind. He could see Yo Eika staring at Seishu's back with crimson cheeks. He remembered looking away from her and down at his feet. There had been a flower there. The whiteness of the flower was so distinct in his mind.

Another memory. An intelligent young girl who'd just been pushed down. She'd glared at her attacker with the intensity of an angry stray cat. She didn't cry, simply brimmed with disdain. The display of strength from the girl's stare

had stopped Kojin in his tracks. Seishu, who'd been walking alongside the chancellor, showed no hesitation in approaching her. She'd tried swinging at Seishu to drive him off, but the young scholar wasn't deterred.

"You sure can hold your own. I could use a friend like you, Renka," he'd said earnestly.

The images flowed back to Kojin one after another. He didn't recall any of his thoughts or feelings from that time, just a series of unfolding scenes.

What on earth is happening to me?!

His pace quickened.

"What's got you so upset?" someone suddenly called out.

Kojin looked around to see Shin Jotetsu emerging from the shadow of a pillar up ahead. Considering he'd been working with Shusei, it was little surprise to see the spy here.

"Let me guess. You're here to rescue Setsu Rimi, report my crimes to His Majesty, and put an end to me?" the chancellor spat.

Kojin reviled the boy as much as he did Shusei. Jotetsu had turned on the chancellor, knowing he was his own father, in favor of supporting Shohi.

"Oh, you have no idea how badly I want to do that," the spy said. "But unfortunately for me, you're the chancellor. If I drive a wedge between you and His Majesty, it's the Ho House that comes out on top. As much as it sickens me, I have to let you go."

Kojin chuckled.

Managed to put that together on your own, did you? It almost makes me want to compliment you.

Jotetsu shrugged dourly.

"Still, there's only so much I can do. You're about to be in some serious trouble. I'm here to tell you that you need to keep a cool head so you can get yourself out of this mess," he added.

Kojin was puzzled, unsure of what the spy was trying to say. But Jotetsu made

an elaborate gesture of ushering him into the garden. The chancellor raised his chin and walked past without offering a second look.

Braziers lit the garden where his carriage sat waiting. He was looking around the area waiting for his carriage to be prepared when the sound of someone pounding violently on the gate rang out.

“Open the gates!” someone commanded. Their voice had a military quality to it, suggesting a familiarity with handing out orders. “I am Kyo Kunki, bodyguard to the emperor! By His Majesty’s imperial decree, you are to open the gates and allow me to search this estate!”

Kyo Kunki?! Why is he here? And why would the emperor—

Kojin suddenly froze in place.

This is what Jotetsu was warning me about.

The gate guard scrambled to unbar the gate. A powerful force pushed the gate open from the outside, and Kunki led a force of soldiers inside with his sword in hand. The troops swarmed around the chancellor, but Kunki broke through the crowd to face him. The bodyguard’s expression was serious, a strange sight for his smooth, friendly face.

“Chancellor Shu? What are you doing here?” he asked in shock.

Kojin decided intimidation was his best strategy.

“What I’m doing here is none of *your* business,” the chancellor snapped. “More importantly, what is the meaning of this? Imperial decree? This is the estate of Ryo Renka, our candidate for Minister of Personnel. How insolent can you be?”

Surprise had clouded Kunki’s judgment for a moment, but Kojin’s rebuke quickly snapped him back to his senses.

“Of course, Chancellor. I am aware of who this estate belongs to. His Majesty has ordered a search of the premises. It is of absolute priority. I am afraid it will be carried out regardless of any complaints you may have.”

“And what is it that you’re after?!”

“We have received a report that Setsu Rimi is here! Do you know if she is,

Chancellor?!”

Kojin didn't know what to say. He clenched his jaw, doing everything in his power to keep his expression from revealing anything.

Who but Jotetsu and Shusei could have deduced that Setsu Rimi was here? Ah, but perhaps they wouldn't need to...

If someone were close enough to Shusei to observe his movements, they could have possibly learned of Rimi's location by following him. For them to be able to observe the scholar without raising suspicion, they would need to be someone close to the Ho House.

Someone close to the Ho House is in a position to leak information to the emperor. But for whose good? The emperor's or the Ho House's? Who could it be?

If Rimi made it safely into their protection, she'd likely reveal that the chancellor was the one who had imprisoned her. If that came to pass, Shohi would not spare Kojin from the consequences.

Kunki seemed to notice the chancellor's rising panic.

“Though it pains me to say it, I must ask you to return with us to the capital, Chancellor,” the bodyguard said. His tone was guarded and his expression was grave.

“You've done it this time,” Kojin mumbled to himself.



Why would he leave?

Rimi stared intently at a single point while her mind worked.

The only reason the chancellor would leave is that he didn't want to be there anymore. He couldn't afford to leave Rimi behind. Logically, him leaving alone was the wrong decision. Unless there was some kind of misunderstanding, the only reason he'd make such an error was that he was too shaken to think clearly.

Shaken? Does that mean... Did I move something within him?

If that was true, even if the food she'd served Kojin wasn't *right*, perhaps it

wasn't *wrong* either.

Maybe there's something I can do for Master Shusei after all.

Perhaps she could still straighten what was twisted, repair what was fractured, and convince those who were intending to leave to stay instead.

Suddenly, a clamor rose from the front gate. Shusei, who had been looking down at Rimi, turned away to see. His expression stiffened.

"What is the meaning of this?!" he demanded.

Renka jumped to her feet. Footsteps could be heard from outside charging along the walkways. Shrieks from handmaidens rang out. The silhouettes of soldiers suddenly appeared in the darkened entrance of the room.

Rimi blinked repeatedly in shock as Kyo Kunki pushed through the crowd.

"Master Kunki?!"

"Lady Rimi!"

Rimi was lying crumpled on the ground while Shusei stood beside her. Renka still stood beside the table. Kunki took a single glance at the situation before charging to the consort's side, sword drawn and pointing at Shusei.

"Get back, cuisinologist! No, Lord Ho!" the bodyguard ordered.

Shusei took several steps back, but he looked unperturbed.

"What are you doing here, Lord Ho? I just found Chancellor Shu out in the garden as well. Were you meeting with him?! Why?!" Kunki demanded. He seemed confused but kept his sword pointed steadily at Shusei while guarding Rimi with his body.

"Who are you?" Renka asked tensely.

"I am Kyo Kunki, personal bodyguard to His Majesty."

"Well well..." Renka said, gazing at Kunki's smooth, shiny face as if appraising the bodyguard's value.

"And here I was wondering what all the commotion was about," Shusei said with a faint smile. "What gives you the right to barge in here during the middle of the night? Are you aware of whose estate this is? Ryo Renka is a vice minister

of Works and has been selected to be Minister of Personnel.”

“I am well aware. I come under His Majesty’s orders. When he received word that Rimi was here, the emperor sent me to investigate. More importantly, why are you here with the chancellor?! Are you colluding with him?!” Kunki demanded as his eyes narrowed in a glare. “Did the two of you kidnap Lady Rimi?!”

“No! That’s not true!” Rimi pleaded.

Kunki turned his gaze across the room.

“Then you’re the culprit, Ryo Renka?” he asked sharply.

“No, Master Kunki! I was—”

Rimi was about to explain that Kojin was the one who had taken her, but she stopped herself just short.

If Shohi finds out that Chancellor Shu was the one who kidnapped me, he’ll be furious.

If Kojin ended up being dismissed, who knew what would happen. The emperor would lose one of the leading minds supporting him. Even if the chancellor wasn’t dismissed, the resulting distrust between them would damage their ability to govern. Shohi’s rule could stagnate or even take a bad turn.

“Tell me who abducted you, then. I’ll tie them up and take them before the emperor,” Kunki said.

What do I tell him?

“I...I was invited here!” Rimi blurted out.

“Invited?!” the bodyguard said. He looked back at Rimi incredulously. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s true. I was invited.”

“Is that true?” Kunki asked Renka, glaring at her with obvious suspicion. “Explain to me exactly how that happened.”

“Invited...” Renka said with a grin. “Well, I suppose you could say that. I

certainly brought her here.”

“Whatever the case, you’re coming with me, Ryo Renka. You will explain yourself to His Majesty,” Kunki ordered.

“That sounds like a pain, but I suppose I have no choice,” the vice minister said, sighing. “What now?”

“Go with them,” Kunki said, glancing toward a pair of soldiers. “Board your carriage with them and leave for the palace. Please, don’t even consider escaping. These orders come from His Majesty himself.”

“An armed escort? You shouldn’t have,” Renka said. She headed for the door at a lazy, shuffling pace. As she passed Rimi, she shot the consort a smile. “I suppose now I can call you by your real name, Setsu Rimi.”

Setsu?!

Kunki had only called her “Lady Rimi.” It was true that the personal bodyguard to the emperor had come for her, but it was still surprising.

“You knew?” Rimi asked.

But Renka simply continued on, flanked by guards on each side.

Once he was certain that the vice minister was safely in custody, Kunki turned his sword on Shusei.

“I must ask you to come with me as well, Lord Ho.”

“I won’t be doing that,” Shusei said. He straightened his shenyi and circled around Kunki on his way to the door. “I simply came here to pay my respects. This mess of yours has nothing to do with me.”

“My orders are to arrest anyone suspected of kidnapping Lady Rimi,” the bodyguard insisted.

“Arrest? Perhaps you’d like to try, then?” Shusei said, stopping and fixing Kunki with a smile. “You’d arrest the lord of the Ho House without a shred of evidence on His Majesty’s orders? The emperor will bear responsibility for anything you do in his name. Imagine the disrespect to my house should you arrest me without evidence when I am innocent. I look forward to seeing how the people and the court respond to His Majesty when they learn of how he

brazenly humiliated the master of the Ho House.”

Kunki visibly flinched.

“Now let me pass,” Shusei ordered.

Kunki stayed silent and motionless in the face of the scholar’s commanding tone. Shusei looked from left to right at the other soldiers, staring at them as if to unnerve them into submission.

“I’ll ask you again. Let me pass.”

Kunki, seeing his men beginning to shrink in submission, lowered his sword in defeat.

“Let Lord Ho pass,” he ordered, clearly frustrated. The other guards lowered their weapons as well.

Shusei walked calmly past them.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi cried softly.

But he didn’t turn back. It was as if he had no more business there. Lord Ho’s departing back had become a familiar sight for the consort, it seemed.

Even so, he had gone this far to save Rimi. Even though his stormy relationship with the chancellor had driven him to the Ho House, she had learned that part of the reasoning was to dismantle the family from within.

If I can just help fill that emptiness, I feel like I can bring the old Master Shusei back.

Which meant that the consort needed to face Chancellor Shu again. Perhaps she’d served him the wrong food. Perhaps something had been missing. Perhaps she’d made it wrong. Whatever the case, Rimi would never forgive herself if she didn’t try again.

“Lady Rimi, I am glad to see you safe,” Kunki said, sheathing his sword and kneeling with tears in his eyes.

“No, no, Master Kunki! Stand up!” Rimi cried, crouching to pull the bodyguard up by the hand. The man’s smooth, shiny cheeks were stained with tears. It made him look like a young boy. “Thank you for coming to save me.”

“His Majesty has been so worried about you. The four consorts, Hakurei, and Jotetsu, everybody’s waiting. Let us return,” Kunki said.

Rimi had missed hearing about Shohi. The young emperor could be angry and selfish, but he could also be like a mischievous child who just wanted to be cared for. He must have been so hurt and worried by her disappearance. The four consorts must have spent so much time fretting together as well. Despite Hakurei’s aloof attitude, she was sure he had moments where the worry had shown in his eyes, and Jotetsu had surely been making every effort to find the consort.

Rimi needed to go home. And as she thought about it, it made her happy to know she had a place to go back to.

It was where she belonged.

III

Once his carriage had left Renka’s estate, Shusei slumped back in his seat and sighed. His head felt like it was on fire from the chaos that had just transpired, but the night air sweeping through the window helped to cool it.

The ride continued in silence for some time when suddenly Shusei realized he could hear hoofbeats behind the carriage. He stuck his head out the window to look. Thanks to the faint moonlight, he was able to make out a lone rider following him: Jotetsu.

The scholar knocked on the roof of the carriage to signal it to stop, and Jotetsu was soon beside them.

“Unfortunately, it seems all our efforts have been for nothing. It’s only a matter of time now before Kojin’s crimes come to light,” Shusei observed.

“It depends. If His Majesty doesn’t probe too deeply, then maybe we can leave some questions unanswered. But I don’t think His Majesty is the type to go easy on the questioning. You must be thrilled, Lord Ho,” Jotetsu said bitterly.

Shusei shook his head.

“As master of the Ho House, perhaps. But personally, no. If he ends up being

dismissed for this, my fun ends here.”

“Tch. How could someone have found Rimi at the same time we did?”

At the same time?

It seemed to be too much of a coincidence. More likely, Jotetsu and Shusei’s discovery had led to another person learning Rimi’s location as well. Someone might have been monitoring the pair’s movements.

As a spy, Jotetsu could move as he pleased. Tracking him would be difficult. That meant the one being followed was more likely Shusei.

But Shusei made a habit of changing the carriages he used when traveling. Without knowing which carriage he was using, it would be impossible to tell where he was going unless they tracked every carriage going in and out of the Ho estate.

But someone inside the Ho House would know which carriage Shusei was riding in on any given day.

Someone inside the Ho House is watching me?

The worrying idea made the scholar frown.

“Well, I appreciate you helping out with this,” Jotetsu said. “If you want to find a little catharsis with the Shu Kojin situation, you should come around the palace. I’d bet he’ll be getting interrogated before too long.”

With that, the spy waved and spurred his horse into the night.

Shusei ordered the carriage to begin moving again. He sighed as its bouncing lightly jostled his body.

So the Ho House is no safe haven. It’s to be expected, I suppose.

The scholar closed his eyes. He could hear Rimi’s pained voice ringing in his ears.

“Because I want you to come back.”

She was so sincere.

Her guess was astute. Sharp, even. But she made a critical mistake, and I took advantage of that. I lied to her. I disgust myself.

It was better to leave her with the wrong impression, but...

She said she loved a disgusting liar like me.

He'd been embarrassingly vulnerable when he'd embraced her, even as he was trying to push the consort away. But she'd come right out and said she loved him. Love. Just the thought of the word filled Shusei's breast with warmth.

I love you too, Rimi. If only I could tell you that.

The crescent moon hung large and bright in the sky.



Summer's end was arriving. Or perhaps it had already passed. The night breeze was pleasantly brisk, and the still air was cool on the skin.

In the capital city of Annei, the streets remained busy even at night. Countless shops remained candlelit, signaling they were still open. Shopkeepers crowded around outside, trying to draw the tottering drunks and anyone else into their stores. Brothels and tea shops only grew busier as night fell.

The main thoroughfare was split into eastern and western sides. From the distant heights of Sekisan, it would've looked like two great wings reaching out into the darkness.

Hakurei hid his face as he weaved between drunks, headed for a certain tea shop. Ho Neison had summoned the eunuch there once before, so it wasn't hard to find. When he arrived, he found a man who appeared to own the shop

"I am Sai. I believe someone is already waiting for me?" Hakurei said.

The shopkeeper appeared to have already been informed and led Hakurei to a room on the second floor.

Well then, Neison. What will your answer be?

The eunuch stood outside the door for a moment to calm his mind.

Some days before, Hakurei had sent a letter to Neison.

"I realize it may already be too late, but I've reconsidered your offer. I'd like to talk and hear your advice."

There had been a good chance that the letter would simply be ignored, so he was surprised when the response was immediate. He was given a time and place to meet. Apparently, Ho Neison still considered the eunuch to be of use.

If I can win him over, I'll be able to get accurate information from within the Ho House.

Hakurei was happy he could be of use to Shohi. He had no place on the throne, but he could still support the emperor. Lately, he'd often found the idea to be a point of pride. He knew Consort Ho desperately wished for Shohi's reign to be a stable one as well. The knowledge that he was granting her wish allowed him to push forward without fear.

"It's Sai Hakurei," the eunuch said softly against the door.

"Come in," a muffled voice said from the other side.

It wasn't Neison's voice.

Suspicious and somewhat guarded, Hakurei opened the door and stepped inside. The moment he was through the door, he froze.

Standing by the window was a person with a stark white face. Or rather, with a white mask sculpted in the shape of a smile. His shenyi was white as well. It almost looked like a theater costume.

"Greetings, Sai Hakurei. I'm here in Ho Neison's stead. You may call me Mars."

Mars?

It was the name of a planet. One that brought calamity.

"Why couldn't Master Ho make it?" Hakurei asked.

Mars simply chuckled.

"Come, sit," they said before approaching a table by the window.

Hakurei cautiously approached the table and sat across from Mars.

"Neison came to me and told me you'd sent him a letter. Since Shusei took up the mantle of master, Neison's essentially been relegated to retirement and doesn't meet with anyone anymore," Mars explained. "I'm about the only one who goes to see him. So when he asked me what he should do, I suggested that

I come in his place. The elderly can let emotion dictate things, you see.”

“Emotion? How do you mean?” Hakurei asked.

“Shusei has forced the man into retirement and driven him out of the Ho House’s inner circle. The family has, in essence, been stolen out from under Neison. Yet it seems he can’t bring himself to hate Shusei. ‘He’s my grandson,’ he says.”

“Isn’t that just passing the torch? Power passing from grandfather to grandchild?”

“What you call ‘passing the torch’ I call ‘a power grab initiated by a child or grandchild.’ Those who crave power never willingly give it up, even in death.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Hakurei said with a faint smile.

Mars leaned forward over the table.

“And you crave power, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure I’d put it like that,” the eunuch said. “I’d just say that seeing the new master of the Ho House oppose the emperor has stirred something inside me.”

“I don’t mind giving you power. Fate’s been unkind to you. By all rights, you should’ve been the one to inherit it.”

“You’ll give me power? But if you’re allied with the Hos, I’d think you’d want Lord Ho to have that seat. Are you saying you don’t?”

“Of course I do. And Lord Ho is doing an excellent job of making it happen. We have all joined forces to see it come to fruition. However...”

Mars lowered his voice.

“One wonders what happens after he’s had his day on the throne. If Emperor Shusei were to die in an unfortunate accident, the throne would be empty. And who but you could fill it? Don’t you want to know what it’s like to sit there?”

Hakurei was too shocked to speak but, after collecting himself for a moment, he managed to find his voice.

“I’m a eunuch. I can’t father a child. Even if I take the throne, who would

come after me?”

“You’d be free to just make a decision. Ryu, Ho, what does it matter? If you’d like, you could even let the emperor live long enough to sire a child and then take it as your own.”

This time, Hakurei was truly at a loss for words.

This “Mars” was apparently close to Neison, but he seemed to have no interest in having a Ho on the throne. He didn’t even care about the stability of the empire. The Ho House was just a tool for him to take the throne. After that, he could do with the empire as he liked.

A chill ran down Hakurei’s spine. The eyes peering out from behind the smiling mask filled the eunuch with fear.

Now that I’ve heard this, if I say no, he’ll find a way to keep me quiet.

The masked man had revealed his intention to betray the Ho House. He’d likely be willing to kill to keep his plans from coming to light. He had an amused smile, and his eyes glinted with a wicked light.

“We understand each other, don’t we?” they seemed to say.

“Well, Hakurei? Don’t you want to sit there? To have that coveted seat in the middle of the sun?”

The Ho House was a mighty lion, but Mars was a parasite consuming it from within. A parasite dangerous to Shohi as well since he planned to take control of that lion and turn it on the emperor.

You’ve chosen your name well. You really do bring calamity. This is a fine mess I’ve gotten mixed up in. What did I do to deserve such an honor?

Hakurei gave his most charming smile.

“Of course. If you can make it happen.”



Kojin and Renka boarded separate carriages and were escorted by guards to the palace where they were detained in the Hall of Law and Culture. According to Kunki, Shohi would meet with each of them the following day to get to the heart of the matter.

Meanwhile, Rimi was escorted to the palace by Kunki in a hastily prepared carriage.

I need to hurry and see His Majesty.

Anxiety bubbled inside of Rimi. A messenger had likely arrived ahead of them to inform Shohi that Kunki had found the consort at Renka's estate. The emperor was probably waiting impatiently to see her. If she didn't hurry to meet him, he could end up having a meltdown.

"What the hell were you waiting around for, you simpleton?!" he'd shout.

Kunki escorted Rimi to the Hall of the Rising Dragon's entrance but urged her to go in by herself. It was considerate of him to ensure their reunion would be just her and the emperor.

The consort raced down the walkways, straight toward Shohi's chambers. She stood outside his door, bowed, and announced herself.

"Forgive the late intrusion, Your Majesty. I've just returned and—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Shohi was out the door and embracing her.

"Idiot!" he cried.

"Your Majesty, forgive me for worrying you."

Shohi was trembling. He buried his face in Rimi's shoulder and mumbled the same words over and over.

"Idiot... You idiot..."

Rimi wrapped her arms around the emperor and stroked his back to comfort him.

I'm back. This is my place in the world.

Rimi belonged by the emperor's side. More than anything else, she was overjoyed that she'd been able to return.

As if trying to make sure Rimi was really there, Shohi buried his face against her neck and kissed it, then brought her hair to his lips before embracing her tightly once more. It was ticklish and uncomfortable, but she resolved to endure

it until the emperor had calmed himself.

It seemed as if the embrace would go on forever, but before long, Tama peeked her head from beneath the hem of Rimi's skirt. The moment she saw Shohi, the dragon's eyes twinkled as if she'd found a new playmate. She pounced onto his leg and hopped up to his shoulder. It was enough to catch the emperor's attention, causing him to finally look up.

"Quinary Dragon. You've returned safely to me as well, I see," Shohi said, eyes sparkling with joy. He finally released Rimi.

The emperor and the Quinary Dragon nuzzled their noses together and looked into each other's eyes. Tama squeaked, bounced up and down on Shohi's shoulder, and then leaped excitedly onto Rimi's head. When the little creature wrapped herself in the consort's hair, Shohi couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I'm sure I worried you by disappearing with Tama."

"It's fine. You've returned, so it's fine. But what on earth happened to you?"

Shohi took Rimi by the hand and led her to the sofa at the back of the room where he sat her beside him.

"A lot happened," she said.

"I received word from Kunki that he found you at Ryo Renka's estate. He said Shusei and Kojin were there as well. And that you insisted you'd been invited?" Shohi recounted. His expression turned grave. "But nobody in their right mind would believe that. What really happened? Are you protecting someone?"

The consort wasn't sure how to respond. She knew it would be wrong to say something that could cause a misunderstanding or put Shohi in a bad position.

"You don't believe I was invited?"

"Who would? It's preposterous."

"Will you please believe me anyway and leave it at that?"

"No, I can't," Shohi said, anger flickering in his eyes. "Somebody tried to take what's mine. That will not stand. I don't know why you're trying to protect them, but I can't stand letting them get away with this."

“Please, Your Majesty. You can’t let yourself get so angry,” Rimi pleaded, clutching the emperor’s sleeve.

If Shohi let his anger consume him, it wouldn’t matter how useful Kojin was to him. The punishment would be severe.

“Tell me what actually happened, Rimi. I heard Kojin and Shusei were both at Renka’s estate. Were you kidnapped and the three of them worked together to rescue you? Or did they conspire to kidnap you?”

“Neither, Your Majesty.”

“Then why were the three of them there? Why were *you* there? If I don’t know, what’s to keep this from happening again?!”

Shohi’s emotions overflowed and he reached out to hold Rimi once more.

Look how badly you’ve worried him, Rimi.

Her heart ached. She wanted to tell him the truth. She couldn’t tell him the truth. The consort was torn, unsure which way was right.

“Stay with me tonight,” the emperor whispered. Sensing his worry, Rimi answered immediately.

“Of course. I’ll stay right here. I’m back, and I’m not going anywhere. I know you’re worried, so I’ll stay by your side until those worries are gone.”

All she could do now was reassure the emperor that she was really there.

Shohi continued to hold the consort in silence for a long time.

“Your Majesty?” Rimi asked, unsure if something was wrong.

At the sound of her voice, Shohi suddenly jumped to his feet. He took Rimi by the hand and stood her up as well. Tama, who’d been sitting on Rimi’s head, jumped down in a panic and scrambled up to the rafters. She stared down at the pair with astonishment in her big blue eyes.

Shohi brought Rimi’s hand to his lips and lovingly kissed each of her fingers.

“Huh?! ”

The emperor then squeezed her hand and pulled her to the bedroom where he pushed the consort onto the bed.

“Your Majesty?!”

Rimi had fallen on her backside, but as Shohi climbed onto the bed, he grabbed one of her arms and turned her on her side. He then threw himself on the bed alongside her.

“Your Majesty, what are you...?!”

Her shock grew with each passing second. She tried to sit up, but Shohi grabbed her by the hand.

“Just stay like this,” he ordered sharply.

The emperor was lying with his body facing Rimi. In the flickering candlelight, his serious gaze was beautiful. His long eyelashes cast thick shadows on his cheeks, which wavered in the light.



This couldn't be...

Rimi recalled some of the things that Consort So had told her in preparation for the Nocturnal Liturgy. The consort was scared that he might do the things she'd talked about. She wasn't sure what to do if he tried. It was probably best to just go along with it obediently, but Rimi didn't know if she was capable of that. She felt she might cry out in fear, push the emperor off of her, and run. But she also knew doing that would hurt Shohi terribly. She'd already worried him so badly. She didn't want to wound him too, she just wasn't sure whether she could control it.

What do I do?

She braced herself...but the emperor showed no sign of moving.

Huh?

Rimi noticed Shohi's earnest expression. He was simply squeezing her hand, holding her beside him, and staring intently at her.

"Just stay like this and sleep here tonight," Shohi said, apparently noticing Rimi's confusion. "That's all I want. Don't worry, I won't do anything."

Rimi blinked at the overwhelmingly surprising order.

"We haven't even gone through with the Nocturnal Liturgy. It would be inappropriate to indulge myself before that," he added, somewhat dejectedly.

"B-But Consort So said that once I'm in a man's bed, I can forget any ideas about the Nocturnal Liturgy or ceremony and there's no way to escape the tragedy of—"

"Would you stop talking?! Do I need to make you be quiet?!"

Rimi stiffened in fear.

"S-S-Sorry!"

"It's fine. You're still full of spirit and you're here. That's enough," Shohi said and squeezed Rimi's hand.

He's so sweet.

The consort couldn't help but smile.

The emperor would likely do everything in his power to find out who had kidnapped Rimi. What would he do if he learned it was Kojin? Could the emperor's supporters still hold off the Ho House if a rift developed between Shohi and his chancellor?

Also, what would happen to Renka? Would she still become the Minister of Personnel? If she did, who would she side with? And if she didn't, who would become the new minister?

So many things felt unsettled.

And then there's Master Shusei...

Rimi needed to face Kojin once more if she wanted to stop Shusei and bring him back to his old self. If she could move the chancellor's heart, maybe she could move his son's as well.

I want him back.

She was alone with Shohi in his room, but once, Shusei and Jotetsu had been there with them. She'd seen them all laugh, work through their troubles, and talk about all sorts of things together. Rimi wanted those moments back.

The consort noticed Shohi was staring intently at her face.

"Your Majesty?"

"I was just thinking about your face. It's so plain. Your skin is nice but that's about it. Compared to the four consorts, it's rather...sturdy. It's reassuring. Like you won't fade away."

"Oh. Err... I'm sorry?"

"You're not supposed to apologize. It's a compliment."

Rimi wasn't sure which part was supposed to be a compliment, but it hurt too much in this position to tilt her head in confusion. She decided to just lie down and gaze back at his elegant face.

"You're beautiful, Your Majesty."

"Is that supposed to make me happy? I'd rather hear that I'm rugged or dignified."

“Oh... Well, you’re dignified too.”

“The moment’s passed,” he sulked.

He was adorable. Rimi couldn’t help but smile at him.

The candles flickered and burned. At some point they went out, shrouding the room in darkness. By that point, Rimi and Shohi were fast asleep, holding each other’s hands. They were able to sleep in peaceful security, like a pair of puppies sharing their warmth.

Amid the darkness, Tama crept down from the rafters and over to the pair’s pillows. The little dragon looked thoughtfully from one to the other.

Stars twinkled in the night autumn sky, and above the darkened mountains, a red star glowed brightly. Mars.

Afterword

Hello everyone! Miri Mikawa here!

When I was writing this volume, one of the characters gave me a lot of grief. That being Shusei's papa, Kojin. He's a lot of trouble, that one. But rather than hate the troublesome characters, I honestly love them. But Kojin... He's too much! Even my editor had a hard time with him. I'm sure the characters in the story are just as fed up with him. I felt like I had to keep apologizing while I was writing. "Sorry for putting this guy in here..."

Speaking of characters, we had a new one in this volume. When I saw Nagi-sensei's rough draft, I was spellbound. I almost felt like the character was too cool looking to be wasted on this. I'm sure you'll get what I mean when you see her.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this volume!

To my editor, I know you always have to put up with me, but I'm especially sorry this time around for troubling you with the Kojin problem. If not for you, I don't even know where the story would be going. It would be total chaos. I'm sorry I have to rely on you so much, but I hope you aren't fed up with me yet!

To Kasumi Nagi, my illustrator, thank you so much for drawing the incredibly adorable Aisha last time around. She's so cute, I feel like my heart is going to burst. I don't know how exactly you'll draw our new character, but from the rough draft I saw, I'm so excited! I appreciate all of your beautiful art so much.

And finally, to the readers, thank you so much for buying this book!

Thanks(?) to Kojin's troublemaking, the next book might be out before too long. I can't say for certain, but be on the lookout for it!

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 8

by Miri Mikawa

Translated by Hunter Prigg Edited by Nicole D'Andria

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